10 STORY WESTERN MAGAZINE

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APRIL

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FEATURE STORY

- **LONG ROPE — SHORT PRAYER!** by H. A. DeROSSO
- **STRANGERS DIE SUDDEN!** by WILLIAM COOK
- **THE LOST CREEK TINHORN** by ROBERT TRIMNELL
- COTTON
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NEXT ISSUE PUBLISHED APRIL 3RD

Combined With **PECOS KID WESTERN**

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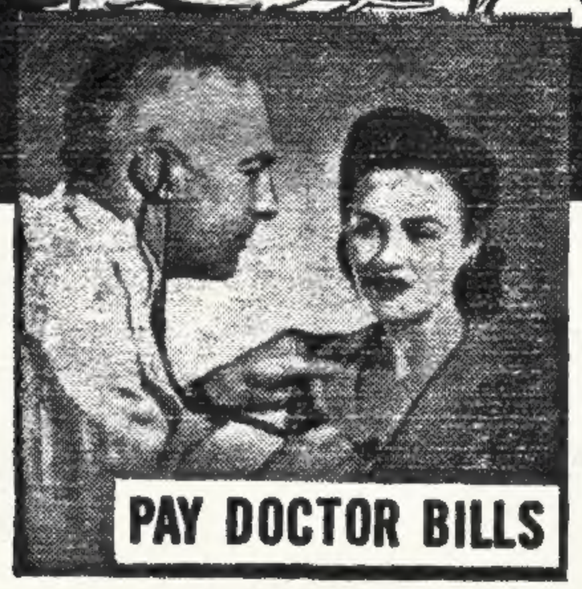

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Next Published 10 STORY WESTERN MAGAZINE Issue April 3rd

Amigos, did you ever wonder what happens to a tinhorn when he can no longer shuffle a deck of cards? Coming up in the next issue will be a yarn by John Jakes which answers the question in a way you'll never forget! You'll meet Graham Coldfield, the *River Queen's* ace faro dealer, at the moment he began the long trail down. . . .

Coldfield had shut his eyes to the ruthless methods of Tom Chapman, owner of the gambling ship, for he and Tom were friends. Then, one night, Coldfield took sick . . .

. . . and Chapman ended their friendship at the point of a gun! Coldfield might have died that night, if it hadn't been for Harriet Masters, who rescued him and nursed him back to health . . .

Coldfield learned then of the many grievances folks had against the *River Queen* and the men who ran it. The tinhorn formed a small army and began to whittle down Chapman's crew. . . .

The day came when Coldfield and his new friends stormed the gambling ship, itself, and Coldfield and Chapman met again. . . . Don't miss "The Tinhorn Fills His Hand!"

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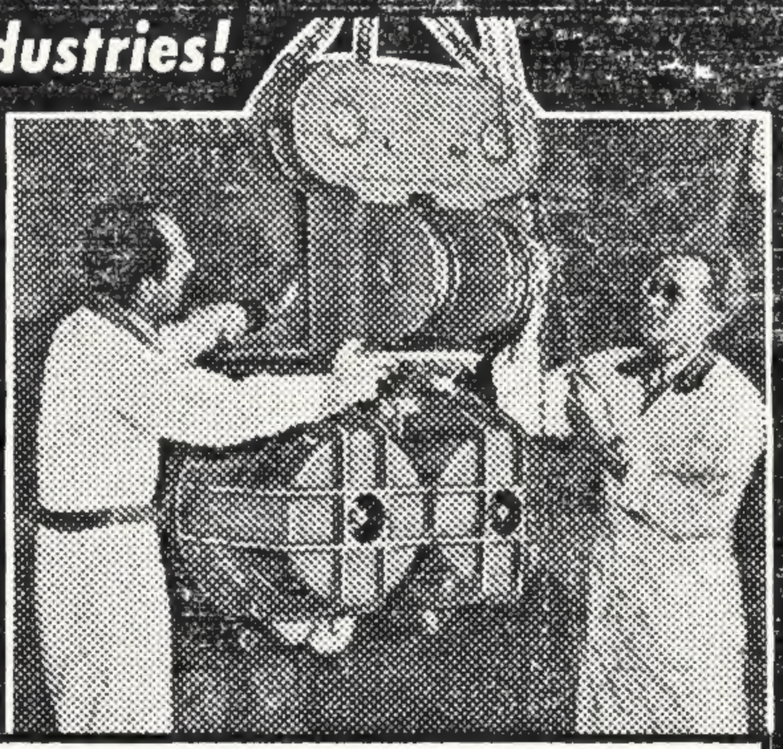

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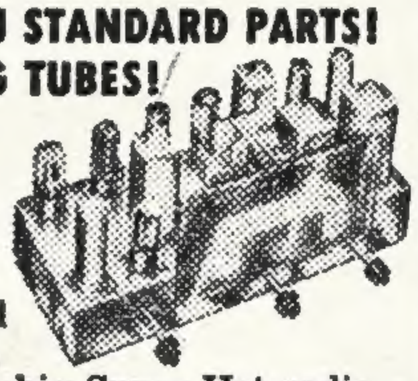

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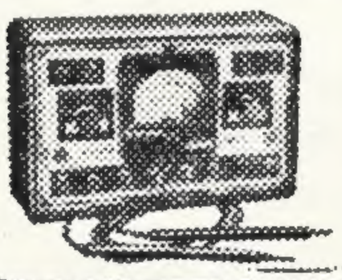

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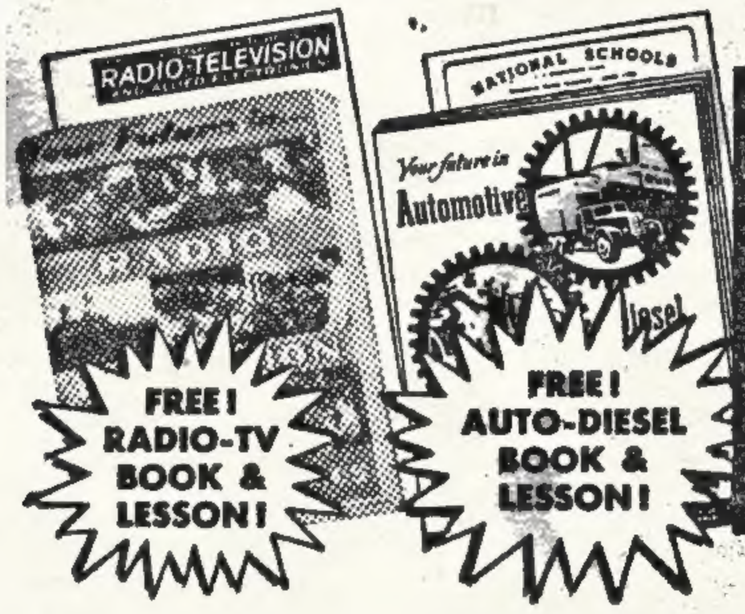

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CIMARRONES!

The wildest bull session the Old West ever saw....

By LEE FLOREN

THE flag of the United States has witnessed some strange battles. But perhaps the oddest battle it has ever seen occurred in the San Pedro Valley, in what is now the State of Arizona. There, the Mormon Battalion, enroute to liberate California from the Mexicans, was attacked by a herd of *cimarrones* bulls and almost put to rout by the angry animals.

Coloradas' Apaches had swept the basin almost free of Whites, and the Mormon Battalion was marching through a land of desolation when the bulls suddenly appeared out of the *mesquite* and *chamiso* and attacked with wild ferocity. At first, the soldiers, tired and footsore, could hardly believe their eyes—a herd of black small bulls with wicked horns was storming down on them.

"Cimarrones! Cimarrones!" a Mexican cried. "The wild bulls—they come for us!" And the guide, wise to the ways of the wild cattle, headed for a nearby tree.

Colonel Philip St. George Cook, the commanding officer, ordered his men to break ranks, and to shoot. One bull charged in, caught a soldier on his horns and, with a toss of his black head, threw the man over his shoulders. Then, snorting and angry, he charged into a team of mules.

Historical records show quite a battle ensued. Soldiers shot bulls who, in turn, rolled dead, sometimes crushing their killers as they slammed forward in their wild momentum. Another bull, wicked horns down low, charged a sergeant. He caught him with a twist of his snorting head, his horn disemboweling the man before he could fire. A bullet kept the bull from goring the dying soldier.

Sometimes bullets stopped the black, hard-charging bulls immediately. But if the ball did not land in the right place, the bull fought on with his sharp horns, giving them a thrust with a twist of his small, wiry body. One coal-black bull charged Colonel Philip St. George Cooke, who was, at the moment, shooting at another enraged bovine.

"I'll get him, Colonel," an enlisted man shouted.

The colonel turned, alarmed by the man's voice. But the enlisted man was a good shot—the dead bull rolled over in front of the officer. Then, the charge was over as suddenly as it began — the bulls were stampeding into the brush, tails up and heads down. Behind them they left dead soldiers, gored men, and some dead and dying bulls.

"I don't know if we won," a corporal said, "but we sure had our hands full for a spell. Guide, what kind of bulls were they, and what was bothering them to charge that way?"

"Those *cimarrones toros, señor;* they are *loco.*"

THE *cimarrones* were native cattle. Centuries before, their ancestors had been brought from Spain and there was, in their veins, some of the blood of bull-fighting bulls—bulls trained for the bloody, sandy

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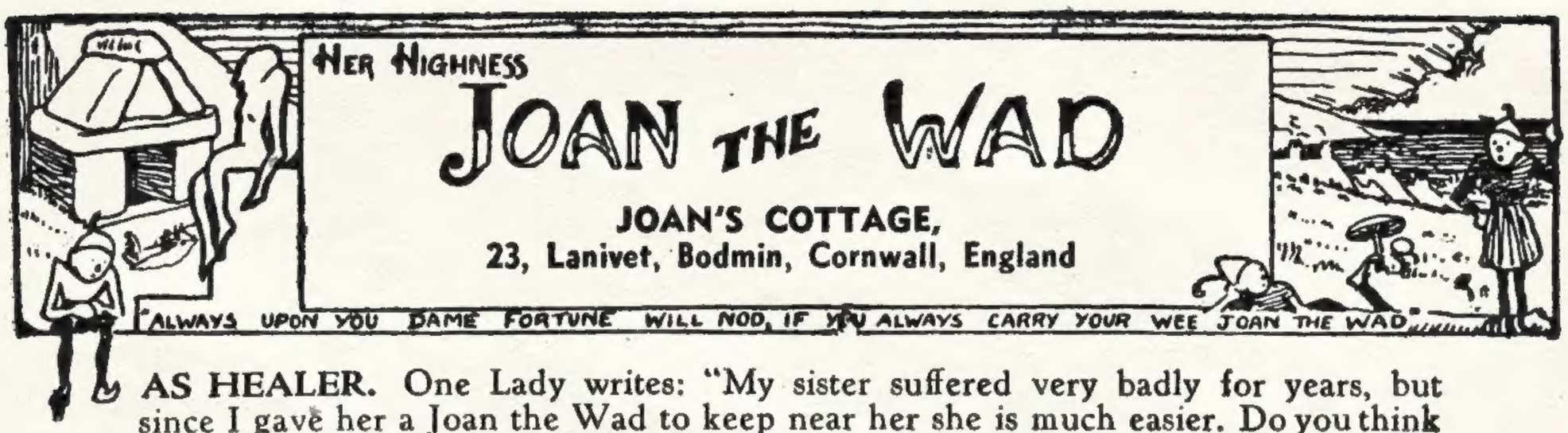

AS HEALER. One Lady writes: "My sister suffered very badly for years, but since I gave her a Joan the Wad to keep near her she is much easier. Do you think this is due to Joan or the water from the Lucky Well?"

AS LUCK BRINGER. Another writes: "Since the war my wife and I have been dogged by persistent ill-luck and we seemed to be sinking lower and lower. One day someone sent us a Joan the Wad. We have never found out who it was, but, coincidence if you like, within a week I got a much better job and my wife had some money left her. Since then we have never looked back and, needless to say, swear by 'Queen Joan'."

DO YOU BELIEVE IN LUCK ?

AS MATCHMAKER. A young girl wrote and informed me that she had had scores of boy friends, but it was not until she had visited Cornwall and taken Joan back with her that she met the boy of her dreams, and as they got better acquainted she discovered he also has "Joan the Wad."

AS PRIZEWINNER. A young man wrote us only last week: "For two years I entered competitions without luck, but since getting Joan the Wad I have frequently been successful although I have not won a big prize. But I know that . . . who won $5,600 in a competition has one because I gave it to him. When he won his $5,600 he gave me $280 for myself, so you see I have cause to bless 'Queen Joan'."

HURRY

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Mr. JONES of Cheltenham, says, 1951:

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THE BRITE BROTHERS—John and Coke—mountain men accused of murdering two peace officers in a rip-roaring nocturnal gun-battle—though the Brite brothers swore they acted in self-defense . . .

T. R. McCLURE, who knew that the ballistics experts were using double talk . . .

RICHARD ROE, successful mechanic with a score of friends, a fine wife . . . and a mistress who was found strangled one day soon after he had visited her apartment . . .

VANCE HARDY, likable, quick-witted, race-track follower and condemned murderer, who had spent 10 years in solitary confinement when the Court of Last Resort began to look into his case . . . And many more.

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"I don't want you to die, Red. And some people here would kill you before they'd stand being framed for the pen!"

Santa Gertrudis citizens hated all rustlers—both alive and dead. They hated even more Red Harrison, who was trying to clear a cow-thief's name. And when that wild cowtown hated anyone, the remedy was always . . .

LONG ROPE—SHORT PRAYER!

An Epic of the Lawless West

By H. A. DeROSSO

THE disturbing thing about this job, Red Harrison thought, was that it seemed so easy. He was not accustomed to having things pan out smoothly with so little effort expended on his part and this fact filled him with a tiny apprehension. Nevertheless, a man was entitled to a break now and then, Harrison felt, and perhaps this was it for him.

He stood up at the edge of the timber, studying the lay of the land below him. What he saw was a small, cup-shaped valley. There were probably a hundred white-faces grazing down below. Harrison suspected they wore the Anchor iron and, if so, he had only to make an arrest and then ride back to Cerro Alto for his next assignment. The whole thing was too pat.

He built a cigarette and smoked it down and all the while the only living things he saw below were the cattle—and the horse. There was a small lean-to laid against the sharp shoulder of a slope. To one side the horse was grazing at the end of its picket rope. Above the lean-to, the pines grew in scattered indifference but they satisfied Harrison. Mounting his apaloosie mare, he circled the valley, keeping to the timber. When he was behind the lean-to, he dismounted and came down the slope on foot.

The only break in the silence was the lowing of a cow. There was a small breeze in Harrison's face but still sweat popped out, beading his forehead and upper lip. He could hear the faint hammering of his heart.

He drew his .44 and came cautiously on. The emptiness of the valley seemed to mock his wariness but he was old at this sort of game. Too often, carelessness had resulted in somebody's dying—and Harrison was always determined it would not be him cashing in his chips, not if he could help it. So he came on with the bared .44 Colt in his right hand.

He gave one brief, swift glance about the valley, noting again that it held only the cattle and the picketed horse. The animal was a bay. It spied Harrison and pricked up its ears and snorted uneasily. Harrison came quickly around to the front of the lean-to, gun leveled before him. However, nothing stirred inside.

Harrison squinted his eyes. At first, he saw only a blur, then he made out the man sprawled on the ground in the shade of the lean-to. The man lay on his side with his head cradled on an arm, sleeping. His mouth was open a trifle and his breath kept gusting in and out audibly. He had no more awareness of his predicament than a steer on the way to the slaughterhouse.

Harrison paused, while that uneasiness chilled the back of his neck. He was so used to having to do things the hard way he could not believe this was the end of this job. Satisfied that the man in the lean-to was deep in sleep, Harrison flashed another look around the valley. All he saw were the peaceful brown blotches of the whitefaces. Even the bay was grazing again, indifferent to the peril that faced its master.

Harrison came ahead a step. His .44 pointed at the man on the ground. "You!" said Harrison sharply. "Rise and shine, bucko!"

THE sleeper stirred a little. He smacked his mouth dryly and his eyelids quivered as if they were about to open, then he relaxed again and the breath began to sough in and out of his throat once more.

"Wake up, bucko," Harrison said, louder. "Coffee's on."

He did not wait for his voice to get results. Bending, Harrison picked up a small stone with his left hand and tossed the rock at the sleeper's chest. The fellow woke with a startled snort, eyes batting furiously, right hand automatically reaching for the handle of the big Starr .44 at his hip. Harrison racked back the hammer of his Colt.

"Let's not get tough, bucko!"

The man on the ground froze. He was up on his left elbow. The big .44 Starr was halfway out of its holster. The fellow's mouth was pulled down in one corner in a silent snarl. He looked from the big bore of Harrison's .44 gaping at him to the chill glint in Harrison's eyes. For a moment their stares locked. Then the man on the ground shoved the Starr back in its holster and took his hand from the grip.

He was an old man, somewhere in his sixties. He had a slight, wiry body that Harrison had no doubt was still as tough as his own. A close-cropped beard, peppered with gray, framed the fellow's face. His eyes were blue and clear and piercing. They stared at Harrison with a grim, studied calculation.

"Up on your feet, old-timer," Harrison said, not ungently. "Forget your iron, though."

The fellow rose slowly. He was still eyeing Harrison intently but there was no defiance in the old-timer's movements. He stood there docilely, arms limp at his sides, still looking at Harrison as if trying to make out what was going on in Harrison's mind.

"Turn around," said Harrison.

The old-timer complied and Harrison lifted the Starr and shoved the weapon in his waistband. The fellow then turned to face Harrison.

A brief flash of pity passed through Harrison. The fellow was tough and well-preserved but he was old and even a few years in the penitentiary would be a death sentence for him. By the look of his face, the squint wrinkles at the edges of his eyes, the wind-browned leathery skin, he had lived outdoors all his life. It was going to be hell for him cooped up in prison. He would not last long, however, if that was any consolation.

"What's your name, old-timer?" asked Harrison.

"Tacoma." The voice was soft, like wind sighing in the tops of pines.

"Tacoma what?"

"Just Tacoma."

Harrison waved his .44 a little. "Those cows all carry the Anchor iron. You don't work for Anchor, Tacoma."

"That's right," said Tacoma.

"You know what that means, don't you?"

Tacoma showed a faint smile and shrugged a little. His manner indicated that he knew he had lost the pot but he was not crying about it.

"Who's in this with you?" asked Harrison.

Scorn showed briefly in Tacoma's eyes. "If there is anyone, do you think I'd tell you?"

"All right," said Harrison. With his .44, he motioned Tacoma out of the lean-to. "Let's start for Santa Gertrudis." That spasm of pity moved through him again. He was too soft, he thought. "You're kind of old for this game, Tacoma. What made you get into it?"

Tacoma shrugged. "Maybe it's the only game I know," he said. He seemed rather unconcerned as he walked over to get his bay.

THEY rode out of the valley and forded a creek that ran foaming white though not very deep this high in the mountains. They climbed to the crest of a ridge and rode along that for a while and suddenly, below them, Harrison saw the rider. The ridge was covered with clumps of mesquite, some of the brush high enough to conceal a rider, but there were many open spaces. The rider spotted Harrison and Tacoma and sent his horse charging up the slope.

Harrison halted his apaloosie and called Tacoma's name softly. Tacoma reined in his bay. He gave a brief look down the ridge, then he took out a plug of tobacco and worried off a chew. He did not seem at all disturbed or excited by the rider's sudden appearance.

Remembering how easy Tocamo's arrest had been, Harrison tensed in the saddle. Unconsciously, his hand dropped to the butt of his .44. With narrowed eyes, he watched the horse charging up the sharp slant of the ridge. First Harrison recognized the animal as an Arabian. Then it dawned on him that the rider was a woman.

She pulled up the Arabian in front of Harrison and sat a moment, breathing hard. She raised a hand and wiped her forehead, then she tilted the cream-colored stetson back a little. As she lowered her hand, the sun glinted off the wedding band on one of her fingers.

"Hello, Mrs. Mullineaux," said Harrison.

She stared at Tacoma for a moment. Then she moved her gaze to Harrison. "What's this, Harrison?" she asked.

"I found him in a valley back there," explained Harrison, "that was filled with Anchor cows. He's your rustler, or at

least one of them. Your husband told me he hadn't lost too many head. I'd say there's a hundred in that valley. Could have been a one-man job." He glanced at Tacoma. "He won't say if he had any partners."

When Harrison looked back at the woman, there was a gun in her hand. It was a small, nickel-plated .32 but she held it like she knew which end the bullet emerged from. It was aimed, rock-steady, at Harrison's heart.

"All right, Tacoma," said the woman. Her lips were pale and stiff.

A swift surge of anger darkened Harrison's mind. Then he took another look of the .32 in the woman's hand and any rashness he might have contemplated disappeared from him. He should have known something like this would happen, he told himself sourly. He had guessed all along something was wrong, but he hadn't counted on it taking such a surprising, unexpected turn.

Tacoma kneed his bay over beside the apaloosie. Tacoma lifted Harrison's .44 from its holster, then Tacoma reached over and jerked his .44 Starr out of Harrison's waistband.

The woman said, "I'll take Harrison's gun, Tacoma."

Tacoma hesitated, staring at the .44 in his hand. Then he shrugged and handed it to the woman. "Like you say, Bridget."

"You can go now, Tacoma," she said.

He did not leave. He sat there in his saddle, staring pensively at Harrison. "I'll be all right, Tacoma," the woman said sharply.

He laid a dubious look on her. It was clear he did not like this. Then he shrugged, "All right, Bridget," he said. He wheeled the bay and sent it racing down the ridge.

Harrison took out tobacco and papers and built a smoke. He puffed on it until Tacoma was gone from sight. All this time he did not look at the woman. He still remembered how she had stirred him the first time he had seen her down at Anchor. He was a lonely man and she was the kind of woman he dreamed about beside a lonesome campfire. But she was another man's wife and that's as far as it went with Red Harrison. She still stirred him, however.

Finally, Harrison pinched out his cigarette and tossed it away. "Why did you do a thing like that?" he asked, still not looking at her.

She hesitated before replying. She said "I'm Tacoma's partner."

His head lifted swiftly and he threw a sharp glance at her. He said nothing.

SHE smiled a little. "It's true, Harrison. I told Tacoma to run off Anchor's cows. In fact, I helped him with most of them."

"Yeah," said Harrison dryly. "You run off your own cows. Then you write in to the Association for an inspector to come and find out who's rustling your beef. You must think I'm awful dumb, Mrs. Mullineaux."

She flushed a little. Then she extended Harrison's gun to him, butt foremost. He took it, staring at her quizzically. Every time he looked at her he seemed to see some new aspect of her beauty. She was a strikingly handsome woman. She was tall and well-built; he could see the rise of her breasts beneath the red flannel shirt. The color of her hair matched the sheen of the Arabian she was astride. Her eyes were a deep, beguiling blue under rich, black brows. When she smiled, even slightly, her cheeks showed two long dimples.

"It's true, Harrison," she insisted. "I had Tacoma run off a few Anchor cattle because I had to get you here."

"Me?" said Harrison, puzzled.

She nodded. Her look was grave and intent. "I had to have an excuse to get a cattle inspector up here. So I made it look like Anchor was losing cows to rustlers. My husband belongs to the Cerro Alto Cattle Growers' Association and I talked him into sending for an inspector. I had to have a man like you here, Harrison."

"I don't get it," said Harrison, shaking his head.

She moved the Arabian over close to the apaloosie. Her hand reached out and touched his arm, lightly. Her face turned appealingly up to him.

"I need you, Harrison," she said, her voice low and thick, as if she were greatly perturbed inside. "I need you to do a job for me. Will you, Harrison?"

A small suspicion nagged at him. "I'm already working for Anchor. What job could you have for me?"

Her eyes clouded and their focus moved past him for a moment as if they were looking into a great distance. The corners of her mouth pinched as if in remembrance of an old pain. She drew a deep breath.

"A little over two years ago," she said slowly, "a man was killed up here in these mountains. He died branded a rustler. I want you to clear his name, Harrison."

He reached for tobacco and papers, instinctively, but when he had them in his hands he found he did not want a smoke. So he returned the makin's to his pocket. "I see," he murmured. He waited for her to go on.

She paused as if uncertain how to continue. Her brow wrinkled. The tip of her tongue came out and dabbed an instant at her lips. Finally she said, "His name was Jim Woodruff. He was young and happy-go-lucky and fiddle-footed but he was good and honest. There was talk around that he was mixed up with a rustler crowd but nobody could ever prove it. Then he was found dead up here and the rustling stopped and the talk went around that it stopped because Jim—Woodruff, had been the leader. That's how it has been ever since."

"This Woodruff," said Harrison, glancing at her obliquely, "was he a friend of yours?"

"I loved him very much."

Silence filled in between them. The Arabian and the apaloosie nuzzled each other. Overhead, an eagle wheeled and from somewhere, faintly, came the crying of a coyote.

Harrison shifted his weight in his saddle and leather squeaked mournfully. "Was this before you married Mullineaux?"

"Oh yes," she said quickly. "Jim was the first for me. The only one for me," she said almost sadly.

"It's in the past," Harrison said gently. "Why not forget about it?"

She twisted the lines about her fingers. She stared with a concentrated studiousness at the Arabian's ears. "I know what you're thinking," she said stiffly. "I've been married to Paul Mullineaux for a year. He was a widower and he had a child. I—I was fond of him, I am still fond of him. I will make him a good wife and he will never have any cause for complaint. But he knows how it was between me and Jim. He knew that before he married me. It will always be only Jim in my heart."

"Does your husband know what you've got in mind?"

"No. Can't you see, Harrison? He needn't ever know. You're here to catch some rustlers and you've got a good excuse for digging into the past. Don't you see? You can say it's that old gang operating again. After they framed Jim, they laid low. Now you suspect they've started again. This way you can dig into it and no one will guess why."

Harrison said nothing. He knew how it was with her. In her heart there was loneliness, and the ashes of an old love. In her mind there was an old, cherished dream, tarnished and marred by this blot on Woodruff's name. Harrison had his dreams, too, and so he sympathized with her.

When Harrison didn't speak, the woman went on, "There are nights when I can't sleep, Harrison. From my window down at Anchor, I can look up here on the mountain and see the very spot where Jim was found dead. When the moon is out or even when there are only stars, I can see the hulk of the mountain and the place where

he died. It isn't because he's dead. I'm used to that by now. I wouldn't have married if I weren't resigned to that. But it's all that I've got left of him, it's all that I can carry with me the rest of my life, only his memory. I want it to be clean and fine like he was clean and fine. It will help me that much more to be a good wife to Paul and a good mother to Angeline. Can you understand, Harrison?"

He looked at her, at the plea in her eyes. They had moistened a little. "He's long gone, Harrison," she whispered. "No one else cares about his name but to me it's everything."

HE COULD SEE. She had had her dreams, about herself and Woodruff and the long years ahead, the two of them together. Now those dreams were shattered and she was trying to hold on to a few pieces, to have something to fall back on those dark and lonely moments when she was another man's wife and not Woodruff's.

"All this happened two years ago," Harrison said slowly. "Maybe whoever it was behind Woodruff's death is no longer in these parts."

"Oh, he is," she cried. "I know he is!"

"How do you know?"

"Don't you see? That's why Jim was killed and the rustling framed on him. So that whoever it was would be free and above suspicion."

"Do you want—revenge?" His voice was chill.

Her face paled. Her eyes widened and her mouth twisted once, convulsively. "I—I never thought of that. I don't much care for vengeance. It wouldn't do any good, not so far as bringing Jim back. I just want Jim's name cleared. That's all."

"When you dig into a thing like this, Mrs. Mullineaux, sometimes you have no choice. I just want you to know that there's a good chance along the line there will be some dying. Do you still want it?"

Her face stayed pale. One hand rose and for a moment touched her throat. "I want his name cleared," she said tightly, "no matter what the cost."

"I'll see what I can do," said Harrison.

"I'll pay you for your trouble," she said hurriedly. "I have a little money and I'll pay—"

He held up a hand. "The Association pays me, Mrs. Mullineaux."

She stared at him a moment longer. Then she reached out and squeezed his arm. "Thank you, Harrison," she whispered. She reined the Arabian around and sent it at a run down the slope. Harrison watched her go. At this moment, he envied a dead man very much.

CHAPTER 2 Not Wanted!

The town of Santa Gertrudis lay somnolently in the midst of sage. All about the town and for some distance beyond the land lay flat. Then the ground began to rise, lifting ever upward in tiers of hills and monstrous ridges, culminating finally in the ragged heights of the purple-misted mountain range.

This seemed a poor location for a town, in a desolation of sagebrush and an occasional ocotillo and manzanita. The timber and the graze were on the hills and mountain but here on the flats had been laid the tracks of the AT&SF and so Santa Gertrudis had been born here because of the convenience of the railroad.

The two men were waiting for Red Harrison as he emerged from the stable. He had been in and around Santa Gertrudis for two days now, asking here and there about Jim Woodruff, but not finding anything beyond the fact that Woodruff was dead and while alive had most likely been engaged in rustling and other kindred occupations.

The instant he passed through the wide door of the barn Harrison knew the two were meant for him. They were lounging

against the front of a barber shop across the street but the moment Harrison showed, they detached themselves from the wall and started toward him. Harrison halted, waiting for them.

Their spurs sang with a shrill complaint. They moved without haste but with a definite, pointed purpose. They were alike in their intent. Each man had both thumbs hooked in his cartridge belt, each man's hat was pulled low over his eyes, each man's glance was fixed unwaveringly on Harrison.

Harrison waited. He rolled a cigarette and popped the smoke in his mouth as he watched them come. He did not light the cigarette. It stayed there dangling from his lips.

They pulled up five feet from him. One of them said, "You Red Harrison?"

Harrison nodded.

The one who had spoken was a big heavyset man. He had a wide, seamed face whipped almost black by sun and wind. The flash of his teeth when he spoke was very white. His clothes were plain and emanated the stench of horse-sweat. His gunbelt supported a holstered Colt .45 with a plain black handle.

"It's come to our attention," he went on, "that you've been going around asking questions about Jim Woodruff's old pals. What do you want with them?"

"Why should I tell you?" said Harrison quietly.

The man showed his very white teeth. His companion snorted. This one was tall and slim and looked to be quite young, no more than a year or two beyond twenty. He was quite the dandy. He wore a gray, high-crowned stetson with the brim curled up fastidiously on either side. His shirt was scarlet silk and he had a silk kerchief wrapped around his neck and fastened with a silver clasp. His trousers were a golden corduroy, the bottoms tucked into the tops of fancy, white-stitched boots. His spurs were plated with silver. His cartridge belt supported two sixshooters, both of them with ivory handles. Apparently, he sank everything he earned into gilding his appearance.

"We're those pals you've been asking about," said the youth. His face was vain. He was blond and not very hairy but he still sported a mustache, a thin, barely visible line of hair that seemed to cling precariously to the edge of his upper lip.

"Yes?" said Harrison.

The youth flushed angrily. "You seem to take it pretty easy, Buster," he snapped.

"Whoa, Bucky," said the dark man. He displayed the whiteness of his teeth again in a placating smile. "Let me introduce ourselves, Harrison. I'm Clay Apple. The kid's handle is Bucky Stewart. We're the gents you're looking for, aren't we?"

"Who said I was looking for you?" asked Harrison.

"You've been nosing around about us, haven't you?" snarled young Stewart.

"Easy, Bucky," said Apple. "Don't mind him, Harrison."

"He better mind me," said Stewart darkly.

"I said, take it easy." Apple didn't smile this time.

"He don't look so tough," sneered Stewart.

"Bucky!" said Apple sharply.

This time Stewart contented himself with a silent snarl, lifting one end of his upper lip while he glared at Harrison. Apple got that white smile going again.

"You see how it is, Harrison, when you go around asking things behind people's backs? Some of us are pretty sensitive and we take unkindly to things like that. You understand, Harrison?"

"What do you want?" asked Harrison.

"Listen to him get tough," sneered Stewart.

This time Apple paid no attention to the youth. Apple said, "It isn't what we want, Harrison. It's what *you* want."

"I don't know what you mean."

"You work for the Cerro Alto Cattle Growers' Association don't you?" asked Apple.

"That's right."

"It's simple, isn't it?" said Apple, smiling but it was more of a grimace this time. "You could have only one reason for asking around about us. It's not the kind of reason that will make us like you."

"Are you trying to threaten me, Apple?"

"I told you he's tough," sneered Stewart.

Harrison turned a quick, angry glance on the youth. With an effort he checked the hot impulse that had flared in him and switched his gaze back to Apple.

"I'm a reasonable man, Harrison," Apple said. "I don't fly off the handle too easy but there are times when I can hardly hold back. Now is one of those times."

The thing was starting to get at Harrison. "Don't let me stop you," he said tightly.

Stewart snarled a curse. "I'll show him how tough he is," he growled.

"For the last time, cut it out, Bucky," Apple said angrily. His mouth kept twitching between a smile and a snarl as he stared at Harrison. "This is not the time or place for it." He finally got the smile functioning again. "Look, Harrison, I'm going to make it plain to you once and for all. You're on the wrong track if you think you're going to tie me and Bucky in with any rustling. I know all the loose talk that's gone about concerning Woodruff. Poor Jim isn't around to defend himself so a lot of dirty sons take advantage of the fact and spread these lies about him. Because me and Bucky were Woodruff's pals, I supose we get tied in with these lies."

Apple's voice turned hard. "Don't you go framing us on the strength of all this wild talk, Harrison. Find yourself some other gents to frame, not us. If you know what's good for you!"

With that, Clay Apple spun on his heel. "Come on, Bucky," he said over his shoulder.

Stewart paused a moment, his lip curling. "Maybe someday I'll see how tough you really are, Harrison," he said. Then he turned and followed Apple.

Harrison struck a match and applied the flame to his cigarette. He was thinking of a lonely woman on Anchor staring up at the mountain. He suspected he would be around here quite a while yet. . . .

MORNING dawned clear and cool. There was a hint of a mist over the sage but then the sun came up and the mist vanished and warmth crept over the land. Throughout Santa Gertrudis roosters were crowing as Red Harrison strolled to the stable.

He rode out of Santa Gertrudis and struck northward, in the general direction of Anchor, but the ranch was not his destination. In fact, Harrison had little idea where he was going. He wanted to find Tacoma. However, Tacoma had no permanent residence. He stayed up in the hills somewhere, Harrison had been told. That was the most he had been able to learn about Tacoma.

By ten o'clock that morning, Harrison reached a tiny crossroads settlement which consisted of a store, a saloon and a dwelling. He queried about Tacoma and was informed the old-timer hadn't been around for over a week.

Harrison rode on.

He was toying with the idea of taking another look at that isolated valley where he had found Tacoma and the Anchor cattle when the horseman showed. He appeared quite abruptly, breaking out against the distant sky-line and stopping, a small, black, unrecognizable blot on the crest of a ridge.

Harrison reined in the apaloosie. There seemed to be something menacing in the way the distant rider had halted there so motionlessly. Cold fingers tickled Harri-

son's spine. He watched the far-off rider and the rider watched him. Harrison remembered that a man had died up here two years ago under mysterious circumstances and he wondered if it had begun something like this.

Finally, the rider stirred. Harrison saw a flash and he knew it was the sun glinting off a rifle barrel. Harrison's hand reached down, touching the stock of the Winchester under his leg, but he did not draw the weapon. The range was too long, even for a rifle.

The sun glinted again and then a spurt of dust kicked up well ahead of the apaloosie and, shortly afterward, the faint crack of the shot drifted down. There was only that one shot. The rider appeared a moment more. Then he lifted his rifle high and brandished it above his head. The next instant he was gone from sight.

Harrison could hear the quickened beating of his heart. The rider's message had been clear and eloquent. Harrison was not wanted here. If he stayed, it could mean his death.

Harrison built a smoke and lighted it. His fingers did not tremble one tiny bit. He was thinking of a woman's loyal dream.

THE woman appeared toward the end of the day. Harrison had dismounted at the edge of a creek. There were pines scattered about and, after looking around, Harrison decided this was a good place to camp for the night. The apaloosie's muzzle was thrust in the water and the first hint Harrison had was when the mare's ears flicked up and then her head lifted abruptly and she nickered.

Harrison saw the woman then. She emerged from the pines, riding a sorrel. She rode the horse up beside the apaloosie and there she dismounted. The sorrel began to drink.

The woman cast a frank, appraising glance at Harrison. Then she stretched out on the ground on her stomach and drank from the creek. Finally, she rose to her feet. She wiped her mouth and chin with the back of a hand and sighed comfortably.

She put that unabashed stare on him again. "You're new in these parts, aren't you?" she said.

Harrison nodded. His eyes crinkled just a tiny bit as he stared at her. She stood about five foot three and she was dark, the skin of her face burned the color of polished leather by sun and wind. Her blue-black hair was caught and tied with a bright red ribbon at the nape of her neck. She was very attractive, Harrison thought, with an oval face marked by large brown eyes and lips the color of ocotillo blossoms in bloom.

"Are you this Red Harrison, the Cattle Growers' Association man?" she asked.

Harrison nodded again.

"The strong, silent type, I see," she murmured and started past him. Perhaps her foot turned on a stone. In any event, she stumbled slightly and brushed against him. He was instantly aware of her warm firmness and as she pulled away, nonchalantly and indifferently, he could see the swell of her breasts under the gray woolen shirt.

She was wearing men's clothing. The levis fitted her hips tightly, almost to the bursting point. The jacket was a few sizes too large for her and she had turned the ends of the sleeves up a little. On her head was an old Army cavalry hat, the insignia removed from the front.

She went over to her sorrel and loosened the cinch. Then she walked back to Harrison. Her head was cocked a little to one side as she studied him.

Harrison felt himself coloring under her appraisal and it made him angry. Then he saw that the look in her eyes was bold and admiring. He knew he stood an even six foot with wide shoulders and narrow hips. His legs were bowed from years of clasping the barrels of horses. He reckoned his face was not bad-looking if one

didn't take into account the faint, white scar over the left eye and the red hair that straggled in bad need of a trimming down over his ears. Still, he couldn't help feeling uncomfortable and self-conscious under her scrutiny.

"It's strange that a stock inspector would come here," she said. "I don't see where there's the need for one."

"Maybe I'm on vacation," said Harrison.

"You *do* have a voice," she murmured, and Harrison felt himself coloring again.

She reached in a pocket of her shirt and came out with tobacco and papers. She began to roll a cigarette. "I haven't heard of any rustling going on," she said as she worked at her smoke. "There hasn't been any rustling in these parts for over two years. You're wasting the Association's money, Harrison."

"How do you know whether there's any rustling going on?"

She licked the paper and then smoothed it in place. "Men have a way of telling me things," she said. "I know most of what's going on in this country." She fixed him with a mocking stare. "Don't you ever spill things to pretty girls, Harrison?"

"Not very often."

"Oh?" She popped the smoke in her mouth. "Will you give me a light?"

He struck a match and held the flame to her cigarette. She took a deep drag and exhaled with a contented sigh. "Thanks, Red," she murmured. "You don't mind if I call you Red?"

"You have the advantage of me," he said.

"I'm Isabel. . . Isabel Cobb."

He ducked his head in acknowledgment. She stared at him a moment longer, then she took a small turn around, her head bowed thoughtfully. She came to a stop before him and laid that cool, calculative glance on him.

"Why are you so interested in Jim Woodruff?" she asked suddenly.

"Did you know him?"

"I know many men."

"I don't doubt that," said Harrison, and this time she was the one who colored.

"I'm really trying to help you, Red," she said stiffly. "However, I can change my mind if you're going to be smart about it."

"I'm sorry."

"That's better," she said, flashing a smile at him. "Now, why have you been interested in Woodruff? He's been dead for two years. He could hardly be involved in any rustling."

"I've got to begin somewhere," said Harrison. "It's been said that Woodruff was the leader of a rustling crowd while he was alive. I've been wondering if that crowd isn't still active."

"He had a crowd all right," she said, smiling a little in recollection, "but I don't think anybody could ever prove they were rustlers. Look, Red. You know how people talk. Jim and his gang were a little wild, but I don't think they ever did anything wrong. I knew all the boys quite well and they were all honest and aboveboard. You can believe me, Red."

"If that's the case, they've got nothing to worry about."

"They're not so sure," she said.

Harrison's eyes narrowed a little. "Did they send you to me?"

"Who do you mean by they?"

"Clay Apple and Bucky Stewart."

She laughed with a trace of embarrassment. "That's right. They want to know what you're up to. They've got it in their heads that you're going to frame them." She sobered and that intent querying came into her glance again. "What are you up to, Red?"

He shrugged. "I'm just working at my job."

"Like I told you, there's no need for a stock inspector around here. The talk is that Anchor sent for you. Anchor hasn't been losing cows. Oh, one, maybe, now and then when a neighbor gets a hankering

for a taste of Anchor beef, but that certainly isn't enough for the Association to send a man in. Just what are you trying to do?"

He ignored her question. "How well did you know Woodruff?"

A shadow wiped the intentness, the vivacity from her face. Her stare, for a moment, went past him as if into the distant, irrevocable past. After a short pause, she said, "We were good friends. Why do you ask?"

"I'd like to know whether Woodruff really was connected with any rustling."

"Oh, he wasn't, Red. I swear he wasn't."

She sounded intense and sincere. Harrison thought it strange that only the women, thus far, insisted that Jim Woodruff had not been a rustler. First Bridget Mullineaux. Then Isabel Cobb. Either something was wrong or else Woodruff had had a way with the girls.

"Everyone else seems to think he was," Harrison said.

A LOOK of rage crossed her face. "The filthy liars," she spat out. "No one ever proved anything. All it has ever been is just dirty, lying talk! I'd think you'd know better, Red, than to believe everything you hear."

"Why was Woodruff killed?" asked Harrison.

That gave her pause again. Her head tilted to one side and she lifted that bold, searching gaze to his face. "Is that what you're after?" she asked quietly.

"I'm just working at my job," he said. "The way I see it there are two possibilities. The first is that Woodruff was a rustler the way gossip has him tallied. The second is that he wasn't—that he was framed. In that case, whoever framed him and killed him, might be the party I'm looking for."

"Do you really think Jim was framed?"

"I haven't formed an opinion yet. I'm still trying to dig up a few facts from among all the gossip." He stared at her narrowly. "No one seems to know who killed Woodruff. Do you?"

She shook her head. "That's something I've never been able to find out."

"Didn't he have any enemies?"

"Not any that would want to kill him." Her glance still questioned him. "Why are you so interested in Woodruff? Is that why you're here?"

He was suddenly afraid that he had told too much. Despite the impression she gave of being flighty and a man-chaser, there was a shrewdness about her.

"I'm looking for some rustlers," he said patiently. "I'm trying to find where to begin. If it's the same crowd of rustlers that operated two years ago, then Woodruff's tied in somewhere. Either he was one of them or, if he wasn't, then he might have been killed and framed to shield the guilty ones. I'm trying to find a starting point."

"Who sent for you, Red?" she asked suddenly.

He experienced a small start of apprehension. "Anchor."

"Who on Anchor?"

Again he told himself he had talked too much. "Why, Paul Mullineaux," he said, "Who else?"

He could feel that cool, shrewd stare on him. Then a look of concern came into her face. She stepped ahead and laid a hand on his arm. She was very close now. He was aware only of that, the closeness, and the swell of her breasts under the gray shirt.

"I like you, Red," she said. Her voice was low and heavy with emotion. "Because I like you, I'm telling you this. Let everything go, Red. Ride back to Cerro Alto and say you just rode down the wrong trail. There's nothing here for you, Red. Please believe me."

He could feel a pain in his throat. "Why should it matter if there's nothing here and I'm just wasting my time?"

"I'm afraid for you, Red," she said, her fingers digging into his arm. She edged

still closer. "I don't want you to die the way Jim Woodruff died. Can't you see?"

Her eyes were wet. He could feel something stirring inside him but he could not define what it was. It seemed to be a mixture of suspicion and loneliness and sudden desire.

"What makes you think I'll die sudden?" he asked.

"You're not dumb, Red. You know I was sent to warn you. People don't like to be framed for something they've never done. There's no other reason why you'd be here. Can't you understand? Some people would kill before they'd stand for being framed into the pen!"

The moisture in her eyes gathered into two tears that came trickling down her cheeks. "Oh, Red, Red," she cried, "I never thought it would hit me like this. I thought I could ride up to you and warn you and then ride away, not caring much whether you listened to me. But now I find that it matters very much. I don't want you to die, Red. You mean too much to me."

"This quick, Isabel?"

"When it's real, it's quick, Red. That's the way it is with me. I won't pretend to be something that I'm not. I—I'm this way because I can't help myself. Don't you ever feel that way, Red? Don't you understand how it is?"

He understood, all right, Harrison thought. There were women that a man could never have and some that he could. Sometimes it made a man feel futile thinking of a woman who was out of his reach. Then all a man could do was try to take what was available in the hope that it would work out for the best. But, always, it was a forlorn hope.

He felt her arms go around him. Her face was so close he could feel the gentle brush of her breath on his mouth.

He drew her tight against him. His mouth bruised down on hers. The dream faded from him. This was reality . . . .

CHAPTER 3 Twenty-Four Hours!

Harrison decided to take a look into that hidden valley where the "stolen" Anchor cows were being held. Perhaps Tacoma would be there. So the next morning Harrison sent the apaloosie in that direction.

The sun was high and bright. In this land of little rain this was the usual pattern of the weather. A sun that glared with monotonous regularity as if in defiance of those who wished for rain. The mesquite and sage and ocotillo, however, did not seem to mind. They appeared to thrive on the aridness. An abundance of moisture would kill them. This was their world.

The rider appeared on a rise, halting momentarily while he scanned the land ahead of him. When he spotted Harrison, the rider came directly toward him. A faint feeling of apprehension settled between Harrison's shoulder blades. He reined in the apaloosie and waited.

The rider was Bucky Stewart.

He rode a horse as showy as himself. The animal was a Morgan and it had been curried and brushed until it fairly shone in the sun. Even on the trail Stewart apparently took the time to groom his horse and for that Harrison had to give Stewart grudging credit.

The saddle had a lot of silverwork that kept flashing and reflecting the sun. The saddle also had one of those wide Spanish horns. The bridle, too, had white-stitching and silver on it. Everyone could see where Bucky Stewart's money went.

He reined in the Morgan about ten feet from the apaloosie. He leaned forward slightly in the saddle and crossed his wrists on the wide horn. Stewart sat a long while like that, staring at Harrison, saying nothing. There was a hard, challenging glint in young Stewart's eyes.

Harrison returned the youth's study. With no one else around to distract him, Harrison could give all his attention to

Stewart. Harrison saw how the thin face was drawn and sullen, he could read the perpetual sneer in the pale blue eyes and see the bristling vanity in the thin blond mustache.

After a long while, Bucky Stewart spoke. "I see you're still snooping around." He said it insolently. Harrison doubted if the youth knew how to speak in any other fashion.

There were a lot of things on Harrison's mind this day. There was a dream and poignant loneliness and the feeling that this job had little about it that was any good. He was uncertain and suspicious, and in the back of his brain there was an inkling of an old, loathesome evil.

"I'm working at my job, squirt," he said testily.

"What did you call me?" Stewart flared. He did not wait for Harrison to answer. "You can't take a hint, can you, Harrison?"

"I don't scare, if that's what you mean."

Stewart's lip lifted at one corner. "Maybe you're too dumb to scare."

"Did anyone ever tell you, Stewart, that you've got an awfully offensive mouth?"

Stewart straightened in the saddle as if he'd been slapped in the face. Dark spots of anger colored his cheeks. "You think you're tough, don't you?" he sneered. "Because you work for the Cerro Alto Cattle Growers' Association you think you're a pretty salty hombre, don't you?"

Harrison could see how it was. He had known it from the moment young Stewart had appeared. Stewart's mind ran on one track. He possessed a singular talent for getting into trouble and rather than trying to tame this inclination, he gloried in his offensive belligerence. He fancied himself as quite a formidable hardcase and he was, but hardcases had a way of dying with their boots on, Harrison thought.

Despite his dislike for Bucky Stewart, Harrison knew a kind of pity for the youth. He was cocksure, with supreme confidence in the twin .45's at his hips. It probably never had occurred to him that it was not always the other fellow who died in a gunfight.

So Harrison tried. He said quietly, "Listen, Stewart, I'm not trying to back out of anything. I know what you've got on your mind. I knew it the minute I saw you in Santa Gertrudis. But let me tell you this. I've been in tougher spots than this many times. I don't mean to brag, but I'm still alive. That should mean something to you. Think it over."

This, however, was alien to Stewart's way of thinking. His lip curled automatically in the only reply he had to reason. "Are you getting a little scared?" he jeered. "Is that why you're trying to back down? I don't brag, either, but I'm not bad with an iron myself."

"You won't accomplish anything," said Harrison, still trying to pound something into the stubborn head but beginning to be indifferent as to whether he succeeded. "You're only making me think you're really mixed up in something. If you weren't, you'd leave me alone."

"You're scared," jeered Stewart. His mind seemed limited to belligerence and violence. "Well, that don't cut any sign with me. I'll show you what happens to hombres who snoop around."

Harrison tried once more. "If you're clean, Stewart, you've got nothing to worry about. I've never framed a man in all my life."

"No?" rasped Stewart. "Well, you ain't starting with me!"

This was the end of the talking, Harrison realized chillingly. Words were too inconclusive. It was the gun and the bullet that were irrevocably final. Reason and logic did not enter here. It mattered not whether a man was right or wrong. It mattered only whether he lived or died. The honest and upright did not necessarily always triumph. This knowledge left a cold spot in Harrison's stomach.

BUCKY STEWART had straightened in the saddle. He had taken his wrists off the wide horn. His shoulders drooped a little and his head ducked down. A cruel, avid look came into his eyes. This was his whole life, this business of matching gun speed with another and killing. This was all that he had contributed to the world in twenty-one years of living.

Harrison waited for it to start. It was an old game with him. It was something he had to expect with the job he had. In the course of time he had acquired a calm fatalism. He rather suspected that someday he would die like this and for an instant he wondered if this would be the moment. But he did not let the thought trouble him. He waited, watching Stewart closely.

The cruelty suddenly brightened in Stewart's eyes. His right hand snatched swiftly at the ivory handle of a .45. He brought it out and up with blinding speed, his mouth contorted in a grimace of ferality. The sun seemed to glitter wickedly on the blued barrel of the .45.

As Stewart's hand had started its pass, Harrison reached for his own .44. The cool butt touched his fingers and then the gun was up and out. The hammer was racked back and he pressed the trigger, lightly. The .44 rocked against his palm and he slammed out another shot.

He saw flame spurt out of the muzzle of Bucky Stewart's .45 but the barrel was pointing wide of its mark. Black gunpowder smoke drifted up into Harrison's nostrils and he lowered his sixshooter slightly. He would not have to bust any more cartridges, not for Bucky Stewart, anyhow.

Stewart folded up gently. His right hand extended out from him and the .45 dropped to the ground. He stretched out flat along the Morgan's neck, the wide horn boring into his stomach but Stewart did not seem to mind. He made no sound. The smell of blood and gunsmoke spooked the Morgan a little and it shied, not at all violently. Still, it was enough to dislodge Stewart. He rolled off the horse sideways, his arms limp and aimless. A small cloud of dust spumed up where he hit the ground.

The Morgan trotted off about ten feet and then stopped. It turned its head and glanced back at Stewart but he lay mute and unmoving. The ground sloped gently where he had fallen and he lay with his head lower than his heels. The blood from his mouth stained the small, vain mustache so that it was no longer visible.

ANCHOR'S cows were still in the valley. Harrison pulled up the apaloosie at the edge of the timber and looked the land over. The cattle did not seem to have been added to, but, of course, that was no longer necessary. They had already served their purpose.

He was here, and he was caught in a thing that really was not his job. It was a crazy, foolish doing, born of a dream and sentiment, things that should have had no place in the matter.

The lean-to on the opposite slope seemed deserted. There was no horse in sight. The only visible things were the grazing white-faces and the greenness of the timber and the monstrous hulking of the mountain crests.

Nevertheless, Harrison thought he'd have a look since he was here. He started the apaloosie down the slope, taking the direct way this time, when he saw the mare's ears flick and, with a sudden wrench of the lines, he whipped the horse around.

Tacoma was there. He sat on his bay which had just emerged from the timber. The .44 Starr was in Tacoma's fist. The big muzzle pointed straight at Harrison's heart.

Harrison had grabbed at his Colt but he was caught high and dry this time. His .44 had not yet cleared leather and, reluctantly, he released his grip, allowing the weapon to slide back in its holster. He could hear the sharp beating of his heart.

"I've been looking for you, Tacoma," said Harrison.

This did not seem to register on Tacoma. He sat there in his kak as it withdrawn into himself. He looked very thoughtful, seemingly absorbed in something profound. His mouth moved slowly, ruminatively as he worked on a chew. He said nothing but the big bore of his .44 spoke volumes for him.

"You can put the gun away, Tacoma," said Harrison. "I just want to talk with you."

Tacoma smiled briefly with a slight touch of disdain. His eyes were cold and impersonal. He could have been a butcher contemplating which beef to kill.

Cold fingers plucked at the back of Harrison's neck. He had no idea what Tacoma's reaction would be but Harrison took the chance. "I want to talk to you about Mrs. Mullineaux and Jim Woodruff."

The ruminative chewing stopped. Tacoma's eyes squinted until they were almost shut. A piercing calculation came into his glance. Then, slowly, his jaws began to move again. The Starr drooped ever so slightly in his hand.

"Why did you take the job?" asked Tacoma.

"I want to help Mrs. Mullineaux," Harrison said simply.

Again that narrowed, intense study came into Tacoma's eyes. The rhythm of his chewing faltered, then picked up again. "Why?" he asked. His voice was soft and gentle.

Harrison thought of the things he dreamed about and how foolish and futile they appeared at times. Then he remembered something else. He laid an appraising stare on Tacoma.

"The same reason you've helped her, Tacoma," he said.

Tacoma shifted his weight in the saddle.

For the first time he took his gaze from Harrison. Tacoma inclined his head and spat. He lowered the Starr still more, resting the long barrel on the saddlehorn. The menace was gone from the gun now.

"What do you want to know, Harrison?"

"What was Woodruff like?"

Tacoma shrugged a little. "He was a man with weaknesses like all of us. Maybe he had a few more weaknesses than average."

"What kind of weaknesses, Tacoma?"

Tacoma shrugged again. He said nothing.

"Would rustling be one of those weaknesses?"

Tacoma lifted a sharp stare to Harrison. "Maybe."

"Tacoma," Harrison said gently, "do you think it's worth it, what I'm trying to do, I mean?"

A cloud shaded the brightness of Tacoma's eyes. "I don't follow the trail," he said.

"You know what Mrs. Mullineaux wants. You wouldn't be mixed up in this otherwise. Is this business of digging into the past any good?"

Tacoma pondered this a while. As he thought it over, he put his gun away. He placed his hands one above the other on the saddlehorn and stared down at his horse's ears.

"It's no good at all, Harrison," he said at last. "You'd better give up and go home."

"Why, Tacoma?"

Tacoma made an exasperated gesture. "You've taken on an impossible job."

"You mean Woodruff really was a rustler?"

Tacoma nodded. There was a sad look on his face. "You've talked to Bridget. You know how it is with her. She'll never stop believing in Woodruff because she will always love him. Even while he was alive she wouldn't believe anything bad about him. Now that he's dead nothing will shake her belief that he was good and honest. The truth is, Harrison, that Jim Woodruff was just no damn good!"

Harrison knew that Tacoma was stating a fact. Harrison had rather suspected this all along, he had always had an inkling that the job was hopeless. It mde him feel sick and dejected.

"Believe me, Harrison," Tacoma went on, "it would be best for all if you dropped this thing. You'll only hurt Bridget more if you keep on with it."

"Who killed Woodruff?" asked Harrison.

Tacoma shrugged. "Nobody knows—except the man who did the killing."

"Why do you want me to give it up, Tacoma?" asked Harrison. "Aren't you in this with Mrs. Mullineaux? You made it possible for her to get me here. Now you want me to back out." His eyes narrowed. "Is that why you took that shot at me yesterday?"

"The reason I'm in this, Harrison," Tacoma said slowly, "is that I'm like you—I can't say no to Bridget." He took a deep breath. "I've never married, I've never had a family, Harrison. I knew Bridget's father. When he died, I promised him I would always look after her. She's like a daughter to me, Harrison. She's all that's dear to me in the world. There isn't a thing I wouldn't do for her." His voice was very chill as he said this.

Harrison looked at those gray eyes. They were like small chunks of ice.

"You know I won't give it up," Harrison said quietly.

"You'll only hurt her more, then."

"She's got to have her dream," said Harrison. "She's entitled to it."

Something like compassion came into Tacoma's eyes. "I know how you feel," he said gently. "Sometimes, though, things just can't be helped."

"What do you mean by that?"

Tacoma shrugged. His face was grim. "Maybe you'll find out someday. If you do,

remember Bridget's dream, Harrison. That's all I ask of you."

Harrison was about to speak when he saw Tacoma tense. The man's head lifted and he rose slightly in his stirrups as he peered down the slope. Turning the apaloosie, Harrison saw the rider.

The horse was a sorrel and the rider kept it moving among the grazing white-faces as if reading the brands. After several minutes of this, the sorrel was headed up the slope toward Harrison and Tacoma.

The sorrel's rider was Isabel Cobb.

SHE was holding the sorrel back, moving it up the slope with a deliberate casualness. Tacoma spat an uncomplimentary remark about her but when Harrison glanced at him, the old-timer's lips were locked. He seemed oblivious of Harrison's interest in him. Tacoma's eyes were intent on the girl. He had forgotten his chew. His mouth and jaws were immobile. The only thing that registered on his face was a white, silent hate.

If Isabel Cobb was aware of this, she gave no indication. There was a small, tight smile on her lips with just the touch of a jeer. She reined in the sorrel and hooked a levi-clad leg around the horn and took the makin's out of a shirt pocket.

She still wore the jacket with the too-long sleeves and before beginning to build her smoke she raised her right arm and shook the sleeve down a little so it would not interfere with the making of her cigarette.

She built her smoke in silence, that taut smile like a fixed grimace on her mouth. She kept her eyes lowered, giving all her attention to the cigarette. Finally, she popped it into her mouth. She struck a match and lighted the cigarette.

Exhaling a great cloud of smoke, she looked first at Tacoma, then at Harrison. There was open contempt in her glance. When she spoke, it was to Harrison.

"So this is how it is, Red," she said quietly. "You *are* going to frame someone, aren't you?"

"How did you get here?" asked Harrison.

"I followed you." She threw another look at Tacoma. The hatred still glittered in his eyes but the tenseness had gone from him and his jaws moved idly while he worked his chew. "You never did like me, did you, Tacoma?"

Tacoma averted his head and spat. He said nothing.

Her smile widened a trifle. She put the cigarette in her mouth and took a deep drag. Her eyes moved back to Harrison and slitted as they studied him. They seemed full of cold calculation. He imagined that was the way a puma's eyes looked before the pounce.

"Why don't you arrest Tacoma, Red?" she asked suddenly, mockery edging her tone. "Didn't he rustle these cows?"

Harrison did not speak. His mind was beginning to comprehend how it must have been two years ago but the exact nature of it still was not clear to him. He could understand the why of many things but who had killed Woodruff and the motive still escaped him.

"You and Tacoma," she said musingly. "These Anchor cows. Maybe I'm a man-chaser, Red, maybe I've only got one thing on my mind but, occasionally, I can add two and two." Her voice became jeering. "Aren't you going to arrest Tacoma?"

Her manner stirred an irritation in Harrison. "I know my business," he growled.

"I guess you do," she said flatly. Anger now made her mouth white at the edges. "Should I tell you how it is, Red? Should I tell you how the frame is set up?"

"You've got it all wrong, Isabel. I'm not framing anybody."

"Don't give me that," she said, mouthing the words with scorn. "I know which way is 'gee' and which is 'haw.' I know now who really brought you here, Red. It was Bridget Mullineaux, wasn't it?"

He was so stunned he could not say anything. He was aware that Tacoma had stopped chewing again. Tacoma's head turned and all his attention was devoted to Isabel Cobb.

She leaned forward in the saddle and pointed with her cigarette at Harrison. "I'll tell you why you're so interested in Woodruff and his old pals, Red. You're trying to square things for Jim, aren't you? Bridget has always claimed Jim was murdered by the real rustlers so the guilt could be framed on him. She's got the crazy notion that it was his old pals who did that to him. So to get even, she's talked you into framing Clay Apple and Bucky Stewart. Isn't that right, Red?"

"That's not it at all, Isabel."

"Oh, but it is!" Anger had brought color to her face. Her cheeks burned and her lips were stiff with rage. "I'm going to tell you something, Red. You're going to drop this thing right now. You're going to ride back to Cerro Alto and tell them there was nothing here. Understand?"

A WRY smile touched Harrison's mouth. "You make it sound like a threat."

"It *is* a threat," she snapped, "and you'd better mind it!" Her eyes narrowed and that look of smug cunning came into them again. "I'm a woman, Red. I know what a man can mean to one of us. I know what he can mean to a woman like Bridget Mullineaux. Do you understand me, Red?"

Prescience chilled the back of his neck. "Go on," he said.

"I know what Jim Woodruff meant to Bridget. I know what his memory means to her. Because I know that, you're going to leave this country within the next twenty-four hours, Red!"

"You're still muddying the creek."

"Well, I won't muddy it any longer." She reined the sorrel over beside him and thrust her face up at him. She was no longer beautiful; hate and venom had distorted her features until all that was attractive had disappeared from them. She had as much beauty as the snarling face of a puma. "You asked me yesterday what Jim Woodruff was to me. Well, he was my husband! Yes, Red. Jim and I were married three days before he was killed. We were married across the mountain in another county. He never cared for Bridget. She was just one of his many girls. He used to get a big kick out of how completely he could fool her. She thought the sun rose and set in him. It was a big laugh to me and Jim.

"Well, he's dead and she's still got her beautiful memories of him and she wants his name cleared and someone framed for the rustling he did. But it wasn't going to work out that way. You want to know why, Red?"

She paused for breath. A vicious triumph glowered in her eyes. Her breasts heaved with emotion. "Because if you don't give up this job, I'm telling her, Red. Understand? If you aren't gone from here in twenty-four hours, I'm riding to Anchor and I'm telling Bridget Mullineaux just how it was between me and Jim Woodruff!"

Harrison's heart was hammering inside him. He felt forlorn and helpless. This was a turn he had never bargained for. "Why have you kept quiet about yourself and Woodruff?" he asked. "Why wait until now to reveal you were married to him?"

She shrugged. "He was killed so soon. You know what he was. I didn't want to be tied in with anything he'd done. I always look out for little Isabel first, Red."

Her callousness and indifference made him ill. He sat there in his saddle too stunned and sick to speak. She reached over and jabbed his shirt with a forefinger.

"Remember what I told you, Red. Twenty-four hours!"

She set spurs to the sorrel. Harrison watched her race up the slope and disappear into the timber. He turned to look at Ta-

coma. The old-timer sat with his hands folded over the saddlehorn. His shoulders were slouched and his jaws worked methodically at his chewing. His gaze was fixed on the spot where Isabel Cobb had gone into the trees. His face was still pale with hate.

CHAPTER 4 Apple's Choice

That night, Red Harrison wrestled with his dilemma. He slept very little. Every time he closed his eyes he saw Bridget Mullineaux's face, her voice whispered in his ears. He imagined her lying awake at this very moment, staring out the window up at the mountain.

He could have wept with futility. There was not much that he could do. There was no chance of clearing Woodruff's name because he had actually been a worthless scoundrel, no matter what Bridget Mullineaux thought of him. If Harrison persisted with his investigation, then Isabel Cobb would destroy Bridget Mullineaux's last beautiful illusion.

He had very little choice, Harrison thought. . . .

Isabel Cobb lived alone in a cabin that had been built by her father. He was several years dead and as a monument to himself he had left behind this house and a barn and a corral, all of them in disrepair, and a daughter who was hardly any credit to his name.

As Harrison rode into the yard, a feeling of portentous evil crawled over him. He could not understand why. The place looked deserted, though Isabel's sorrel paced restlessly in the corral. There was no other sign of life.

The door of the house was open, the interior gaped dim and ominous. Harrison felt his flesh crawl again with an ugly prescience and, as he approached the door, he drew his .44.

He stepped inside and the first thing that struck him was the feeling of death. Even before he saw the bodies he knew that there had been dying in this room, it seemed to linger, reluctant and cloying and evil, in the air, he could feel its unclean crawling over every inch of his skin.

Isabel Cobb lay curled up on her side, her face to the wall, as if in the bliss of an untroubled sleep. The thing that spoiled this impression was the now dried pool of blood that had formed under her. Sunlight slanted through a far window, falling on her face, gently, as if afraid that she would waken. Her eyes were closed but her mouth was still twisted slightly in a final grimace of agony. The sun would have been kind not to have revealed this.

The other body was that of a man. He lay on his face across the room from the girl. Some of the blood on the back of his shirt was still moist and the idea came to Harrison that this one might still be alive. He turned the body over and saw that it was Tacoma.

Tacoma's face was gray. If he was not dead, he did not have long to go. There was still warmth in his wrist as Harrison felt for Tacoma's pulse. It came faint and erratic, as if not much caring whether it continued to beat.

Harrison took a little water and poured it into Tacoma's mouth. After a moment, the old-timer swallowed and then his eyes began to flutter and, after what seemed an eternity to Harrison, they opened.

Tacoma stared up at Harrison as if not seeing him. The fear struck Harrison that this was the blankness of death but then Tacoma's breath began to rasp a little in his throat.

"Can you hear me, Tacoma?" said Harrison. "Can you tell me what happened?"

Tacoma did not answer. He went on staring up with that remote fixity.

Harrison had an understanding of how it must have been. The past and the present were no longer a puzzle to him. He did not have to ask any more but he did want

some additional information from the man.

"You killed Isabel, didn't you, Tacoma?" He found that his throat was tight, the words ached when they emerged.

The focus of Tacoma's eyes shifted now, it moved to Harrison's face. Tacoma's head dipped in the slightest nod.

"You killed Woodruff, too, didn't you?" said Harrison.

"He hurt Bridget," said Tacoma. His voice was weak but it was still thick with rage. "I warn him never to hurt Bridget but he did it anyway. Isabel would have hurt Bridget, too."

"Who got you, Tacoma?"

"Clay Apple. He was here when I rode up. I didn't care. I warned Isabel to keep her mouth shut and she said no—so I killed her. Apple let me have it in the back. He thought I was dead and rode away." A spasm of pain racked him. The agony of it convulsed him, jerking him halfway up, and Harrison caught him and eased him back on the floor. Sweat broke out on Tacoma's face. "Harrison," he gasped, clutching frenziedly at Harrison's arm, "don't let Bridget down, Harrison, don't let her down."

"You know I won't," said Harrison.

Tacoma's eyes glared with a frantic, desperate intensity at Harrison's face as if seeking some hint of insincerity there. What he saw must have satisfied Tacoma for he relaxed and a small smile came over his mouth.

"I'm glad it was you who came," Tacoma whispered. He closed his eyes and died. . . .

IT WAS almost sundown when Red Harrison reached Clay Apple's ranch. Apple's brand was 7 Cross and it lay hard up against the mountain, running mostly up and down. If the land had been any steeper, the cows would have had to be shod with spiked shoes to keep them from sliding down the mountain.

7 Cross was either a poor man's spread or an indolent man's outfit. Harrison thought of it as a combination of the two. The buildings were set on a narrow shelf with the mountain rising behind them and the land falling away in front of them. The structures were nothing to brag about. The barn was ill-made and listed to one side. The house had a sagging door and a pane of a four-light window had been broken and repaired with a gunny sack shoved into the hole.

There was timber growing on the steep slope behind the buildings and Harrison left the apaloosie in the trees while he proceeded down to the house on foot. He had pushed the mare hard for fear that Clay Apple might get it into his head to quit the country. And that is just what Clay Apple had in mind.

A horse with a pack-saddle on it was standing in the yard as Harrison came around the corner of the house. He heard sounds in the corral and, looking that way, he saw Apple in the act of saddling a shaggy-haired black.

Harrison pulled back behind the shelter of the house while Apple led the black from the corral over to the pack-horse. Apple had no idea he was being watched. He gave a long look about him, as if taking mute farewell of what had been home to him, then he began a final check of the knots on the pack-saddle. He was calmly absorbed in this when Harrison walked out.

At first, Apple heard nothing and suspected nothing. Then Harrison's spurs emitted a mournful jingle and Apple stepped swiftly away from the pack-animal, his right hand beginning a pass at his gun. Then he spied the .44 in Harrison's hand and Apple checked himself with his fingers just curling about the grip of his six-shooter.

He froze like this for an instant while his eyes slitted and his lips pulled back to reveal the startling whiteness of his teeth.

Harrison said nothing. He was disappointed that Apple was not going to go through with his draw. So to dare the man,

Harrison holstered his .44—and grinned.

The silent snarl faded from Apple's lips. Puzzlement crinkled his face and then he must have seen how it was. His hand came away from his gun.

"You know why I'm here, Apple," said Harrison.

Apple knew all right but he could not believe it. It showed in his eyes. He lifted a hand and rubbed once at his chin and then he carefully hooked his thumbs in his belt.

"I don't know what you mean, Harrison," he said.

"Tacoma talked. He told me who killed him."

On the instant, Apple's lips twitched. Then he had himself in control. "So what?" he said. "Tacoma killed Isabel. I only returned the favor."

"Tacoma told me how things stood around here. He named Woodruff's gang—Bucky Stewart, Isabel Cobb and you!"

Apple's smile was a white challenge. "Can you prove it in court?" he said.

An ugly purpose was clawing at Harrison's brain. He did not like to think about it. He tried pretending it wasn't there. He said with a deliberate slowness, "You were worried once that I was going to frame you, Apple. That's just what I'm going to do!"

The smile faded from Clay Apple's face. A mixture of emotions registered there. First there was unbelief, then indignation and finally savage rage.

"You're doing nothing of the kind!" he snarled. "Isabel told me what you're up to." A look of cunning filtered into his eyes. "You take me to court and I'm telling what I know about Isabel and Jim Woodruff."

"Do you think that will keep you from going to prison?" said Harrison, his voice hard. He had a brief vision of Bridget Mullineaux dreaming of what might have been. "Do you think it will do you any good? You're an outdoor man, Apple. I've seen your kind after they've been cooped up in the pen. Do you really believe you can live more than four or five years? You can take the chance if you want to."

Apple licked his lips nervously. He could see what was coming but he did not want it that way. His glance tried to lock with Harrison's but it would not hold. Apple snarled with a pretense at bravado.

"I'm the only one who can prove your connections with Woodruff. I'm the only one who knows you killed Tacoma," said Harrison quietly. "I haven't told anybody else—yet." He let it stand like that.

He could see Apple thinking it over. The man's gaze shifted, he stared off into the distance, not looking at anything in particular, just going over this matter of his life against his freedom. It was as simple as that but it was a hard decision to make and Apple found nothing pleasant about it.

Now that he was face to face with it, Harrison was surprised that he knew no misgiving. After all, he was staking his life against Apple's. He wasn't taking any unfair advantage. Apple looked competent, he had evidently used his gun in the past, he would have as good a chance of coming out of it alive as Harrison. To Harrison, this was as fair as it could be. He was gambling his own life, which was the most he could give. At the last instant, Harrison found himself wondering if this was worth it when stacked against a woman's illusory dream.

Apple finally reached a decision. He took a deep breath and his glance shifted back to Harrison and this time it did not waver. Slowly, Apple's thumbs came out of his belt and his right hand moved out and back a little so that it hung poised above the handle of his sixshooter.

For an instant Apple was like that, then his hand dipped. Harrison drew and fired. Even as he pressed the trigger the thought struck him that if he was beating Apple it was not by much. The bore of Apple's .45 gaped at him, he saw flame spurt out of the muzzle, something scorching hot seared the side of his neck.

Then Clay Apple was falling. He went down by degrees. He hit the ground first with his knees and for a moment he was like that. The gun was still in his hand and he tried lifting it, face grimacing with pain, but before he could fire he tipped forward, and sprawled, lifeless.

Harrison punched the spent shell from his .44 and inserted a fresh load. He found that he was trembling all over.

BACK at Anchor, Paul Mullineaux puffed pensively on his pipe while he listened to Harrison. Mullineaux was a tall man of about forty. The hair at his temples was gray but the rest of it and the neatly trimmed mustache was still coal black in color. He sat and puffed and listened, nodding his head in agreement.

Bridget Mullineaux sat to one side in an armchair, her eyes never wavering from Harrison's face. He did not look at her but he was conscious of her steady glance on him. He kept remembering how she had brought Mullineaux his pipe and had lighted it for him and how contented Mullineaux appeared with a wife like that. It heightened Harrison's loneliness and he found himself envying Paul Mullineaux very much.

"So you can see how it was," Harrison said. "It's true that Woodruff chummed around with Apple and Stewart but he never took a hand in their rustling. He knew what they were, of course, and he kept quiet about it because, after all, they were his friends and he was no squealer. He kept after them to quit and they got mad about it and one day they killed him. It was easy then for Apple and Stewart to stop the rustling for a while so that it would look like Woodruff had been the big auger and without him the gang had busted up. But Woodruff really had nothing to do with the rustling. His name is clean."

"And Tacoma?" asked Mullineaux.

"Apple thought Tacoma had squealed on him so he killed him." Harrison paused awkwardly. "As for this Isabel Cobb, Stewart and Apple fought over her. Apple won although it didn't do him much good."

"Then the case is closed?" asked Mullineaux.

"That's right."

"You've done a good job, Harrison," said Mullineaux, smiling. "You don't know how much it means to me and my wife that you've cleared up this matter."

Harrison glanced at Bridget Mullineaux. She sat there with her legs curled under her and a far-away look in her eyes and a small, happy smile on her mouth. She was deep in her dream, as she would always be until the day she died, no matter how kind and true she might be to Mullineaux it would ever be the dream first in her heart. It was Woodruff for her, now and forevermore.

Mullineaux shook hands warmly and then Bridget roused herself and said, "I'll show Harrison to the door, Paul."

They did not speak. Their feet made no sound on the carpeted floor. Harrison was conscious of her nearness, she walked so close she almost touched him, the scent of her perfume was in his nostrils. She held the door open for him and as he passed through she reached out and touched his hand, briefly.

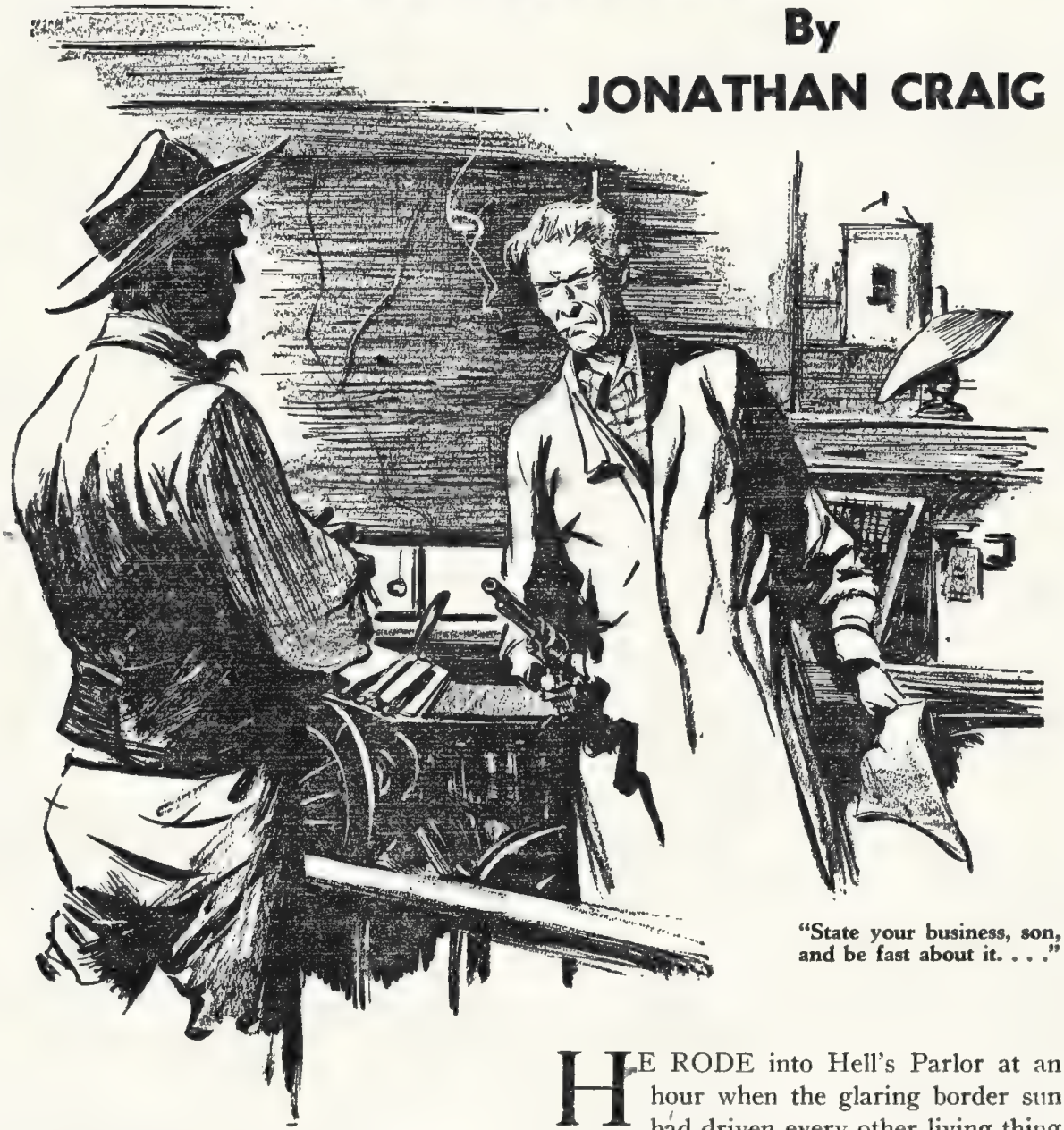
The apaloosie was saddled and waiting in front of Anchor's big house. Harrison mounted and turned in the saddle for one more look of her. She stood there on the gallery, watching him, and, as his head turned, she smiled and lifted a hand in farewell. He ducked his head in acknowledgment and started the apaloosie.

He reached high ground and reined in the apaloosie for a rest. The buildings of Anchor were visible from here, they appeared tiny and toy-like. He could see the gallery of the house but, though he had dared to hope, no one was standing there.

After a while, he started the apaloosie again, northward, in the direction of Cerro Alto. • • •

THE GUNLESS WONDER

By JONATHAN CRAIG



"State your business, son, and be fast about it. . . ."

Hell's Parlor was no town for a man like Gallagher, who'd packed his guns away and sworn never to use them. But then Hell's Parlor was no place for any man—who planned on dying in bed!

HE RODE into Hell's Parlor at an hour when the glaring border sun had driven every other living thing from the rutted white dust of Main Street. He had ridden far that day and the dirt from his back trail was a gritty paste in his mouth. His eyes swept both sides of the street until he singled out the livery stable, and then he urged the buckskin toward it. First, as always, he would take

care of his horse. Later, Doug Gallagher thought longingly, there would be the single glass of cool beer and a bath in the back room of a barber shop.

He left the buckskin at the livery and then, coming out once again into the sweltering sun, he sensed the strange difference of this town. The liveryman had treated him with more curiosity than saddlebums usually aroused. And now, Gallagher remembered, he had heard no sound in this town; he had seen no one in the doorways along the boardwalk, and the blinds had been drawn tightly across the upper windows in the scattered false-fronted buildings. It was as if the town were holding its breath, quiet and listening.

Gallagher stood in front of the livery a moment, weighing these things in his mind. Then he shrugged and crossed the street toward the Border Pride Saloon. He was a big-boned, wedge-shaped man with half-curly black hair looping damply across a wide forehead under a battered Stetson. His smoke-gray eyes were thoughtful as he pushed open the batwings and stepped inside the cool dimness of the Border Pride.

There were only three men at the long bar. In unison, three heads jerked toward the batwings and three hands stabbed downward toward the butts of Colts. Gallagher sucked in his breath. His tongue moved slowly across heat-cracked lips as he stared at these men and he felt the short hairs at the back of his neck beginning to lift.

Two of the men were gaunt-faced and lean-hipped, and their clothing and the hot lights in their eyes told Gallagher they were men with guns for hire. The third man was taller than the other two, bulky-shouldered and heavy-joweled. He was dudishly dressed in a black suit and white vest. His low-crowned cream-colored hat was spotless. Now his sleet-blue eyes shuttled from Gallagher's face to his waist and back again as he stepped away from the bar. Gallagher wore no gun.

"I thank you for the reception committee," Gallagher said. "But it appears I'm not the gent you're expectin'."

Trouble . . . For almost a year now the gnawing fear of trouble had been with Doug Gallagher for every waking moment. "Remember," old Doc Craven had said. "You aren't like other men, any more. You've done nothing but hell around and lap up redeye ever since you were old enough to draw your thirty and beans. Your heart's taken all it can, Gallagher. If you want to keep living, stay away from trouble. If trouble comes after you, run away. Leave your gun in your bedroll and raise your hand against no man. That isn't an easy thing to do in this country, son, but it's either that or cashing in your chips."

And now, facing trouble once again, Gallagher knew he had to keep a cool head, play this game the way these men wanted it played with no questions asked.

The bulky-shouldered man said, "What's your handle, friend, and what's your business in Hell's Parlor?"

"Gallagher. And the only business I got in mind right now is a glass of beer." He managed a grin. "If you gents are agreeable."

One of the gaunt-faced gunslicks snorted. "Aw, what the hell, Nordeen! This jasper ain't nothin' but a saddlebum. He ain't even packin' an iron."

Nordeen's cold eyes locked with Gallagher's. "I don't reckon you'd know a coyote here in town, name of Sheldon?"

"No."

"Then you ain't down here spyin' on us for him?"

"No."

Nordeen took three swift steps forward and pushed his beefy face close to Gallagher's. His eyelids lowered until his eyes were just pale slits in the folds of fat. "The *hell* you ain't! Listen, mister, you ain't drinkin' no beer in this place. You're leavin'—pronto. And if you ever show yourself in here again I'm goin' to

let daylight through you!" He spread a wide hand on the front of Gallagher's faded denim shirt and showed.

Gallagher felt helpless rage surge up within him and angry words choking in his throat. His hands balled into fists against the leanness of his long thighs. A year ago he would have sunk his fist up to the wrist in this burly man's sneering face—and the man's Colt be damned. But now. . . .

He turned away slowly and left the saloon. A ripple of contemptuous laughter followed him through the batwings and the sound of it was like a smarting slap across his face.

GALLAGHER'S thoughts were bitter as he walked along the boardwalk. He hadn't been in town five minutes, and already he had backed down to another man —the way he had to a dozen others in as many trail towns this last year. Ever since Doc Craven had told him about his heart he had been nothing but a mockery of a man, always running away.

He turned in at the next pair of batwings, and this time, too, men turned to stare at him. But no hands dropped to six-guns. And after they had seen that he was unarmed they went back to their low-voiced conversations. Gallagher found a space at the far end of the bar and ordered beer. When it came, he stood there sipping it slowly, thinking about Doc Craven's warning. It was true that he had raised his share of puncher's hell. He had drunk more quarts of whiskey and had more fights than he could remember. And he'd had a reputation with the ladies.

All that was before he had his fight with Red Sheely. Sheely ran the largest gambling hall in Dave's Junction, Kansas, and that red-headed fire-eater had been Gallagher's rival for a sloe-eyed girl who sang in Sheely's gambling hall. The girl had played one man against the other until neither Sheely nor Gallagher could stand it any longer. There had to be a showdown.

They had left their guns on the bar in Sheely's hall and gone into the street to settle it with their fists. The fight that followed was the worst that any of the old-timers could remember in the history of Dave's Junction. When it was over, both men were badly in need of a doctor. Doc Craven, a thin-faced oldster who spent all his free time at one of Sheely's faro tables, had done what he could for them.

The next day he had visited Gallagher to change his dressings, and it was then he discovered Gallagher's serious heart condition. His orders had been firm: no liquor, except maybe an occasional glass of beer. No tobacco. No dancing. No heavy work. And—no trouble. . . .

A week after the fight, Red Sheely challenged Gallagher again. Gallagher had walked away. The town had labeled him a coward, and after that he had found life unbearable in Dave's Junction. He had run away. He had been running ever since.

Now and then, in the guarded whispers along the bar, Gallagher made out the name of Sheldon. That name again; the same name Nordeen had mentioned in the Border Pride.

He let the last of the beer slide down his throat, glanced regretfully at the empty glass, and left the saloon. He found the barber shop, had a shave and a bath, and a little later he stopped at a cafe for a steak and a can of tomatoes. Then he was ready to look for work. The money in his pocket was not enough to keep him and the buckskin for more than two days. He'd have to work a while before he could drift on.

Among other things this last year, Gallagher had learned to be a printer's devil, and now he angled across Main Street to the office of the *Hell's Parlor Free Press.* A long green shade covered the entire length of the glass door, but he heard the clacking of a hand press inside. He twisted the brass doorknob and walked in. .

A girl in an ink-stained shirt and levis looked up at him from behind a small desk. She had the bluest eyes Gallagher had ever seen and her skin was as white and smooth as cream in a saucer. Her taffy-colored hair was brushed straight back and hung in loose waves on her small shoulders. The blue eyes questioned him.

Gallagher cleared his throat and took off his Stetson. "I'm lookin' for work," he said. "Where's the boss-man?"

She spread her hands on the top of the scarred desk and her eyes traveled over him, missing nothing. When she spoke, her voice was low and even. "Granddad's in the back." She gestured with an ink-darkened thumb toward the door behind her.

Gallagher muttered his thanks, moved around the desk and pushed open the door she had indicated.

THE oldster at the small hand press had tousled hair the color of bleached cotton. His face was deep-lined and pale, but his thin body was straight under the smudged smock he wore and his eyes, beneath shaggy white brows, were of the same startling blue as the girl's. One gnarled hand held a Peacemaker, and it was leveled at Doug Gallagher's belt buckle.

"State your business, son," he said in a surprisingly deep voice. "And be fast about it."

Mentally, Gallagher cursed the minute he had laid eyes on Hell's Parlor. Aloud, he said. "I thought you might be needin' an extra hand around here."

"You wouldn't be another one of Lute Nordeen's sidewinders, by any chance?"

Gallagher shook his head and suddenly there was something almost humorous about this situation. He laughed shortly. "Not that *I* heard anything about. I know who he is, though, because he kicked me out of a saloon about an hour back."

"Why'd he do that?"

Gallagher shrugged. "Seemed to think I was spyin' on him for a gent named Sheldon. Or so he said." He smiled wistfully.

The oldster's bright eyes probed into Gallagher's. Gallagher felt the wisdom behind those eyes and he knew they were boring beneath the surface of words. He felt as if his very soul were being searched.

Gradually the Peacemaker lowered toward the floor and the ghost of a smile drifted across the oldster's face. He shoved the gun into the deep pocket of his smock and some of the tenseness went out of his thin body. "*I'm* Simon Sheldon, son. The man Lute Nordeen was talking about." There was a tired note in the deep voice.

Gallagher let his breath out slowly. He pulled a chair from against the wall and straddled it. His eyes were thoughtful as he rolled the single smoke he permitted himself each day against Doc Craven's orders and pasted it to his lower lip. "I'm just a stranger here," he said finally. "Maybe I've got no right to ask, but I'm damned curious about what's goin' on in this town. Nordeen roughed me out of the Border Pride. Just now you threw down on me. I don't savvy."

Simon Sheldon leaned back against the hand press. He fished in a pocket a moment, brought out a piece of cut plug. He bit off an inch of it and tucked it in his cheek. "It's an old story," he said softly. "Lute Nordeen owns a strip of land along the Rio that isn't any wider across than a man can shoot with a sixgun. But it stretches out on both ends to hell and gone. It's miserable land, good for nothing but what he uses it for. Rustling."

He turned his head slightly to one side and rocked a gobboon six feet away. "You see," he went on, "Nordeen's land fronts more than a dozen smaller ranches. All he has to do is pick one of them and chase as many cattle as he can lay his hands on down into his own land. A few hours later they're getting their bellies wet in the Rio Grande. It's all over before the ranchers know what's going on."

Gallagher took a long drag on his ciga-

rette, dropped it to the plank floor and ground it out with his heel. "I see," he said. "But just how do you come into this?"

"The ranchers are losing everything they've got. Hell's Parlor depends a lot on the trade it gets from those small ranchers and the cowhands who work on them. Another few months and the town would fold up."

Simon Sheldon rocked the gaboon again and wiped his mouth with the back of a blue-veined hand. "I figured the *Free Press* could help. I worked up a statement and had it signed by six of the ranchers. They swore that they had cut trail on their cattle as far as the boundary of Lute Nordeen's ranch. I published it in my paper, thinking it might draw enough attention to get the Governor to send a man down here."

"And did it?" Gallagher asked.

"Hell yes. But before he got here Nordeen hired two of the fastest gunhawks between here and Dodge City and had them pay a little social call on the ranchers—just to give them an idea of what would happen if they didn't talk just right. Those ranchers aren't gunfighters and they've got families to think about. Every man-jack among them tucked his tail between his legs and told the Governor's man he'd never seen the statement before it was published in the paper."

Gallagher shifted his weight on the chair. "What about the town marshal and the county sheriff?" he asked. "Can't they do anything?"

"The sheriff could, except Nordeen's got him on his payroll." A strange light came into the old man's eyes. "As for the marshal, he was drygulched the morning after Nordeen's gunnies showed up. He was my son. That's his daughter, Nancy, you met out there in the office."

Gallagher stood up and pushed the unruly black hair off his forehead. "Well, I guess I'll be moving along. I'd like to find a job today, if I can."

Simon Sheldon laughed without humor. "There's one more thing that might interest you, son. Nordeen gave me until six o'clock tonight to get out of Hell's Parlor. If I'm not gone, he's coming after me. He and his gunhawks."

Gallagher's eyes widened. "Then why aren't you gone?" You can't figure to face paid killers and walk away alive."

Sheldon pushed himself erect. He stood very straight, shoulders squared. "I *don't* expect to, son. But I don't have a lot of years left, either. What little time I do have I can spend any way I choose—all at once, if necessary. There's an outside chance I can rid this county of Lute Nordeen. It's a chance worth the taking."

Gallagher had nothing to say. He went through the door to the outer office and pulled the door shut behind him. Nancy Sheldon turned to look up at him, and now for the first time he noticed the dread in her eyes. He said, "Why didn't you make him leave?"

She shook her head slowly. "I couldn't. He's never run from anything in his life."

"But he's an old man now," Gallagher said. "He hasn't got a prayer."

"No. But he's not afraid." There was pride in her voice, and hearing it Gallagher felt his own shame eating closer to the core of him.

"I'm sorry," he said.

Nancy Sheldon said, so softly Gallagher had to strain to catch the words, "At least he'll die a man's death." Her eyes moved slowly toward a clock on the wall. "It's almost five. Just another hour now. . . ."

He stood there a moment, hands opening and closing at his sides, studying this girl. He felt the strength of her and knew it came from a courage that was stronger than anything he had ever known. He listened to the wall clock ticking away the last seconds of an old man's life, a life that had been spent in fighting weaker people's battles. He moistened his lips, but he could find no words for this girl. He turned and left

the tiny office with a feeling of futility.

THE sun was far from its zenith now and its rays stained the dust of Main Street a deep orange. The desert sky was a gigantic bruise above him as Gallagher turned his steps toward the other end of town and the livery stable. He walked slowly, and once again he was the only person on the boardwalk.

Emotions he had thought long dead had been rekindled. Memories of his wilder days, his hell-raising, flooded his memory. His had been a useless life; he had been only too willing to take everything he could get from it, but he had never given anything in return. He thought about the towns he had run away from and sudden, bitter contempt for himself seemed to swell and burst within him. He thought of old Doc Craven's warning to him and the constant shadow of death that had been so close to him. . . .

But now the cold fingers of fear were gone. He lengthened his stride toward the livery and there was a hard set to his muscle-ridged jaw. A man stepped from a doorway, saw the cold glitter in Gallagher's eyes, and backed hastily inside.

Gallagher turned into the livery, found his bedroll against the wall and began untying it. The pot-bellied liveryman came through from the stable. His thick lips started to form words, but then he saw the expression on Gallagher's face and the words remained unsaid.

Gallagher lifted the .44 Colt and his gunbelt from their nest in the bed-roll, feeling the hard, cold weight of the gun, the roughness of the ridged bone handle. The front sight had been filed down flush with the barrel.

He buckled the gun belt around his waist and looped the leg-thongs of the holster around his thigh. The flap of the holster had been cut away and now, as Gallagher straightened, the Colt hung low on his leg, ominous and deadly.

He spoke over his shoulder to the liveryman. "Go over to the Border Pride and tell Lute Nordeen he's wanted in the street."

The liveryman did as he was told, keeping as much distance as possible between himself and Gallagher as he scurried around him.

Gallagher walked out into the street then, conscious once again of the stillness of this town, of the unseen eyes behind the drawn blinds, of the fear and dread that charged the air. But there was no fear in Gallagher. He had realized he had not been born a coward and that he could not die a coward. His days of running away were over forever. There were two ways for him to die, and now he had made his choice and he was not afraid.

The liveryman disappeared through the batwings of the Border Pride, and as Gallagher waited he felt a tingle of anticipation. His mind was calm, but the muscles across his wide shoulders and along his arms were as tensed as steel springs.

NORDEEN came through the batwings, black coat pushed back and thumbs hooked in his gun belt. A heavy gold watch chain glittered in the sunlight across his white vest. There was arrogance in his walk as he stepped off the boardwalk into the dust. Behind him, the gaunt figures of his two paid killers moved casually through the batwings and fanned out to each side of him. Their movements were unhurried. They looked at Gallagher without expression.

"I take it you didn't cotton to what I told you a while back," Nordeen said.

Gallagher's voice was level, soft. "What you said makes no nevermind, Nordeen. The last time I palavered with you, I didn't have anything in mind but a glass of beer. Now I'm tellin' you and your two gunsharks to get the hell out of town."

Lute Nordeen's jaw dropped and disbelief was in his heavy-joweled face. But

only for an instant. Then anger leaped into his sleet-blue eyes and thick cords stood out in his throat. Yet, when he spoke, his voice was low-pitched, calm. "Mister, you've been talkin' to Simon Sheldon. The crazy galoot's talked you into believin' a pack of bald-faced lies. Now why don't you step inside and have a drink and—"

Nordeen's hand was a white blur toward his gun.

Gallagher whipped his own Colt from leather as he hit the dust. He felt it buck in his hand as he slammed two shots at Nordeen and saw two tiny dimples form just above the watch chain on the beefy man's white vest. He caught his heel in the dust and shoved with all his strength, throwing his body aside. He heard the wind-lash of a slug near his head, and then he was pumping lead at the two gunhawks. One of them screamed, twisted half around and pitched headlong from the boardwalk into the street. The other snarled and sprang to one side, his sixgun belching fire.

A sledge hammer hit Gallagher in the shoulder, smashed him back into the dirt. He jerked up on an elbow and triggered the Colt. The hammer clicked dully on an empty shell. The gunhawk heard the helpless clicking of the trigger and now his face twisted with triumph and he brought his gun up slowly and took deliberate aim. Once again there was the futile sound of firing pin on empty cartridge.

With a choked cry of rage the gunman vaulted from the boardwalk and threw himself on top of Gallagher.

His left arm useless, Gallagher kicked high with his boots, caught the man in the pit of his stomach. Then, scissoring the gunhawk's flailing body between his hard muscled legs, he twisted his grip to the barrel of the Colt and brought the butt down again and again on the killer's head until the man stopped moving, until Gallagher knew he was dead.

Then a dark cloud seemed to move across the sun and Gallagher felt blackness closing in around him. He felt his head sinking back into the soft hot dust of Main Street. . . .

THEY had stretched him out on the long bar in the Border Pride and they were milling around him, shouting questions at the kindly-faced man who bent over him, working gently but efficiently on his shoulder. There was a burn in his throat and he knew someone had given him a drink of whiskey. In the crowd around him he made out the tousled white hair of Simon Sheldon and, just beside him, the trim figure and taffy-colored curls of Nancy. Her hand was on his forehead and it was as cool and gentle as an evening breeze. Gallagher looked up into the wide blue eyes and grinned. "It's mighty nice for a feller to find out he ain't dead."

She smiled at him and pursed her lips and said, "Shhhh!"

The kindly-faced man, whom, Gallagher knew, must be the local doctor, slipped the shirt back over Gallagher's shoulder and said, "Another couple weeks, bucko, and you'll be good as new. Lucky for you that slug didn't hit a bone."

(Continued on page 110)

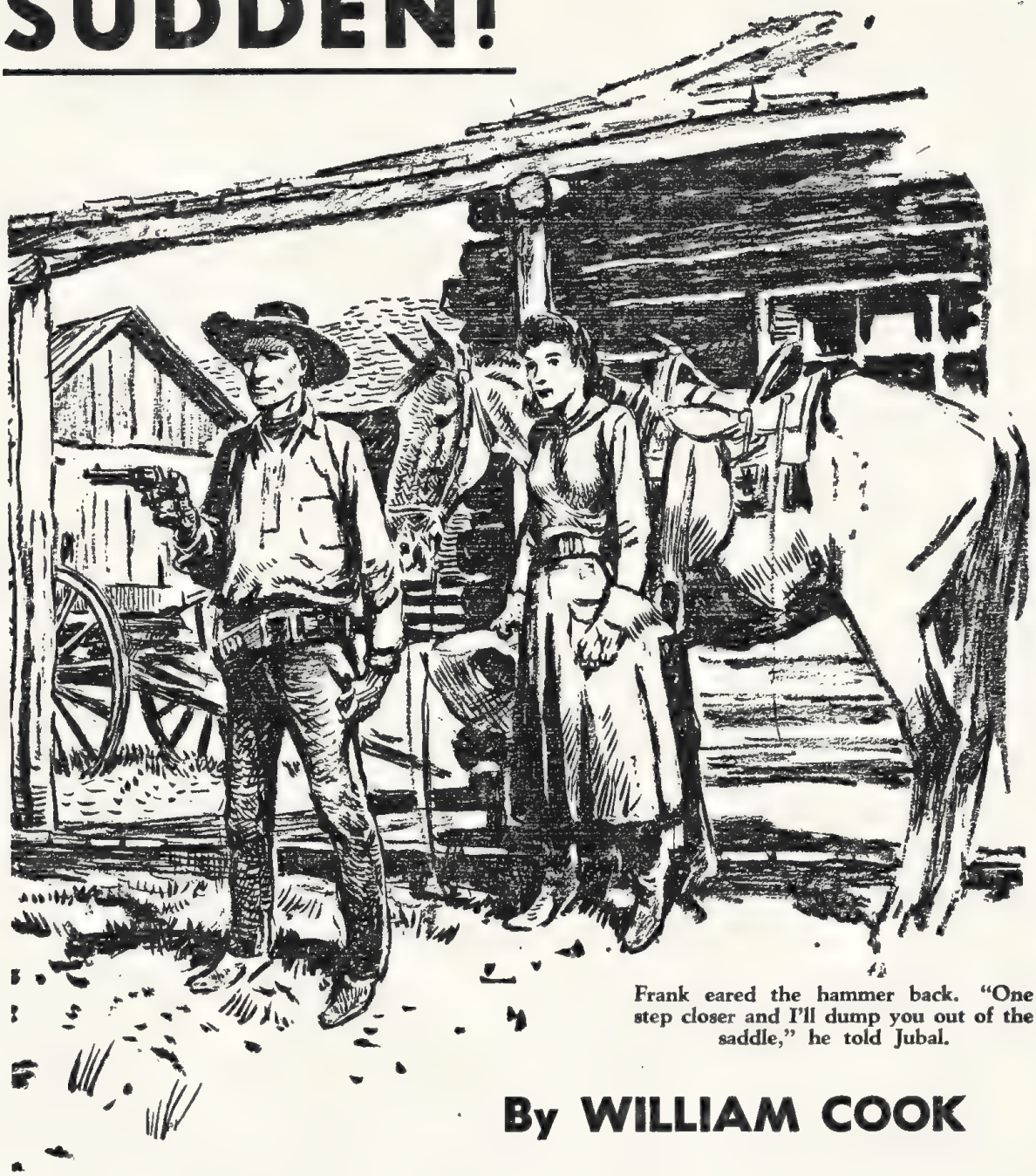
Statement required by the Act of August 24, 1912, as amended by the Acts of March 3, 1933 and July 2, 1946 (Title 39, United States Code, Section 233), showing the Ownership, Management, and Circulation of 10 Story Western Magazine, published bi-monthly at Kokomo, Indiana, for October 1, 1952. 1. The names and addresses of the publisher, editor, managing editor, and business managers are: Publisher, Henry Steeger, 205 East 42nd St., New York 17, New York. Editor, Henry Steeger, 205 East 42nd St., New York 17, New York. Managing editor, None. Business manager, None. 2. The owner is: Recreational Reading, Inc., 205 East 42nd St., New York 17, New York, Henry Steeger, 205 East 42nd St., New York 17, New York. Shirley M. Steeger, 205 East 42nd St., New York 17, New York. 3. The known bondholders, mortgagees, and other security holders owning or holding 1 percent or more of total amount of bonds, mortgages, or other securities are: None. 4. Paragraphs 2 and 3 include, in cases where the stockholder or security holder appears upon the books of the company as trustee or in any other fiduciary relation, the name of the person or corporation for whom such trustee is acting; also the statements in the two paragraphs show the affiant's full knowledge and belief as to the circumstances and conditions under which stockholders and security holders who do not appear upon the books of the company as trustees, hold stock and securities in a capacity other than that of a bona fide owner. Signed, Henry Steeger, Publisher. Sworn to and subscribed before me this 7th day of October, 1952. Eugene Jelinek Notary Public, State of New York. Qualified in Bronx County, No. 03-1962300. Certificate filed in Bronx and N Y counties. My Commission expires March 30, 1953 (Seal)—Form 3526—Rev. 8-50.

STRANGERS DIE

Old Jubal McCall wanted no truck with smooth-talking neighbors. And one more word from Frank Pace would stop his mouth forever!

HE HAD been following the deer trail since early morning, tracing its tortured winding from the dun colored outcroppings high against the sky, down the side of the mountain to the babbling spring at the base of a prehistoric watershed. Frank Pace grunted softly, and

SUDDEN!



Frank eared the hammer back. "One step closer and I'll dump you out of the saddle," he told Jubal.

By WILLIAM COOK

swung from the jaded mare. He swept off a battered hat, exposing a damp mass of corn yellow hair, and looked around him, carefully studying the huge pocket of rock.

To the south, the wall rose in a breath-taking sweep that ended against the darkening blue of the sky. West of him, the land climbed in gentle upward sweeps, and ended in lofty, snowcapped crags, with the setting sun blazoning a splash of wild color as a backdrop. Young Pace looked to the north, seeing the defile widen into a deep valley. Through the deepening shadows of coming night, he saw the stands of timber, a small band of elk browsing along the fringe. The grass was an undulating wave of green-black, stirred by a gentle evening breeze.

He led the horse away from the spring, and off-saddled quietly and efficiently,

picketing the mare behind a thick grove of junipers. He was a tall boy, barely out of his teens. Riding had gaunted him, pounded him into layers of flat muscle. The wildness and desolation of the land had had its way with him, pushing the nonsense out of him; stamping a wariness on his smooth face.

Young Pace squatted by the spring, examining the damp loam for sign of recent visitors. He filled his canteen and his coffee pot, dipping a hand into his coat pocket for a handful of grounds. He spent a few minutes gathering sticks for his fire, and stopped, listening to the thudding pound of running horses in the valley north of him.

When the sound grew closer, he shifted the coffee pot to his right hand, and lifted his gun from the cross-draw holster on his right hip, at the same time fading into the now dark juniper thicket. The gun clicked softly as he cocked it, and the sharp sound of shod hoofs on rock came to him as a rider drove the hard-ridden horse toward the spring.

The first rider pounded into the clearing, racing around the rock-walled perimeter. Pace watched the man's desperate search for the faint trail that led out, but the night tricked him, and he cursed, wheeling back toward the spring. Only the labored sawing of the blowing horse broke the silence as he threw himself off.

The man had scarce touched the ground, when the other rider pulled into the clearing, and reined his winded horse to a halt. The man's voice was cold and hard. "You made a serious mistake comin' here! There ain't no way out, 'cept a damn deer trail the devil himself couldn't climb!" He dismounted with a creak of harness leather, and ordered, "Make a fire, and be damned quick about it! And remember that I'll have a gun on you all the time you're doin' it!"

The other man let out a long sigh, and bent to gather dried twigs. He whipped a match alight, and stood back when the blaze ate into the blackness of the night. Frank Pace peered through the foliage, and saw the old man with the gun. He was dressed in jeans and brush jumper, with a white shirt and string tie adding an odd note of elegance. He was old; sixty or more, and his mouth was half hidden by a gray handlebar mustache. The seamed face twisted when he spoke.

"All right, now move away from it!" He motioned with the long-barreled Peacemaker Colt, and the other man edged away from the fire, turning so Pace could see his face for the first time.

The boy saw that he carried no gun, and his coat was torn along one sleeve. He was a tall man, near fifty, with iron gray hair, and a firm positive jaw. His pale eyes held the older man's steadily, and he asked in a tired voice, "Aren't you going to shoot? That's what you threatened if I ever came back, wasn't it?"

"Is that the only reason I should?" the old man asked.

"You really don't need a reason, Jubal," the other replied mildly. "You're a hater, and a hater don't need any reason other than the dark thoughts in their minds. You're like an Indian. You'll never get over it, will you?"

"Why should I?" the old man roared. "I've lived with it for eighteen years now, just waitin' for the day when you'd get up guts enough to come back. You thought you could take her away from me, didn't you? With your fancy talk and Jim Dandy ways. That's what she went for—soft words and damn pretty lies. You figured you'd just say a few magic words, and she'd become your wife. You thought you could take her, and then claim what's mine."

"You're wrong, Jubal," the man said angrily. "You have it planted in your mind that she was yours, and she never was. You left her alone, and went roaming around. The report was that you were dead. That was why she married me. But I could have talked her into a divorce and married her if she hadn't had some fool notion that

her first duty was to you. When you came back—"

"I come back all right!" the old man snarled. "I come back just in time to spike your pretty scheme. I'd have killed you too, if you'd been man enough to stick around and fight . . . you dirty wife stealer!" The old man's knuckles whitened as he gripped the butt of the Colt, and he mopped his mouth with his sleeve.

THE firelight sent flickering shadows across their faces, but the man's pale eyes never wavered. "Why don't you shoot and get it over with? She's dead now, and the rest don't matter much. I failed her once by not killing you. Now I've failed again . . . I didn't even get to see the girl."

Jubal laughed then, a dry cackle that rang like a struck saber blade. "I am going to shoot, but first I want to see the greasy sweat pop out of your yellow hide. I want you to feel some of the things I felt, night after night, knowin' my wife was pinin' herself sick over another man .... you!" He daubed at his mouth again, and his eyes were two smears in the firelight. "My own little girl, lookin' at me like I was a stranger . . . never cottonin' to me, like my own flesh and blood should. I been through hell, and it's gonna end here and now." His gnarled thumb eared the hammer back, and he lifted the muzzle.

"Wait!" the man called. A muscle twitched along the set line of his jaw, and he paled beneath his deep tan. "What you've been through will be nothing compared to what's ahead of you if you shoot me. I'm going to give you something that will eat the heart and soul out of you . . . like a disease, until your mind snaps." He took a deep breath, and said. "You have no soul, Jubal. Just a warped sense of ownership. Think about it, Jubal. The child was born while I was her husband." He paused to let the words soak through, and added quietly, "You know . . . she could have been mine."

The old man's eyes filmed over, and he cried out like a mortally wounded animal. He fired, shoving the gun forward as if to jab the bullet into the man he hated. He shot again, and again, even as the body crumpled. The smell of burned black-powder sifted across the clearing, and young Pace gaped, wide-eyed, as the old man strode forward and kicked the dead man in the face.

The old man stood, gun dangling at arm's length, studying the figure on the ground. He cursed softly under his breath, and kicked at the fire, scattering it in a shower of sparks. He stopped, and bent down, examining the ground carefully. He wiped a match alight, and when it burned his fingers, struck another, holding it still for a long moment before whipping it out and searching the foliage with his eyes.

Frank Pace held a hand over the mare's muzzle, and breathed through his open mouth. A locust nearby sent up a wild chirping, and an elk down the draw raked his rack against the bole of a tree. The sounds came back in the silence like the echo of a beaten gong. The boy crouched there, heart thumping wildly, as the old man's eyes swung to the juniper clump, and stopped. The Peacemaker lifted, pointed, and the boy felt the ivory butt of his own Colt grow slick with sweat.

A breathless moment passed, a complete stoppage of time, it seemed to him, before old Jubal's eyes swung away. The old man turned to his horse, mounting with a deep grunt. He looked around carefully once more, then lifted the reins and vanished into the night.

Frank Pace waited for an hour before saddling quietly. His coffee was forgotten as he led the horse from the thicket, nervously expecting a bullet to come crashing out of the blackness. He still held the short-barreled Colt in his hand, and reholstered it. He led the mare past the spring, carefully avoiding the soft dirt. He swung into the saddle without touching the stirrups

and let the mare pick her way through the blackness onto the valley floor.

A thin layer of clouds covered the sky, and a warm breeze drifted across the sea of grass, but the boy hunched his shoulders and turned up his collar against the chill running through him.

THE ranch, when he first saw it, was a disappointment to him, but he smothered it quickly. He had neglected to consider what a year of neglect could do. Weeds grew knee-deep in the yard, while a wagon rotted into uselessness near the sagging barn. The cabin door stood ajar, dangling dejectedly on one leather hinge, and bear spore littered the stoop. Young Pace hooked a knee over the saddlehorn, and surveyed his purchase with a jaundiced eye. He thumbed the battered hat to the back of his head, and extracted the worn deed from his chap pocket.

The mare stamped a foot impatiently, and he patted her absently without lifting his eyes from the paper. The horse whinnied, and Pace wheeled, his left hand crossing his body to his gun. He searched the rim of the ridge for a moment before he saw the rider picking his way through the aspens and bunch pine.

The boy sat his horse quietly, hand on his gun until he saw the raven knot of hair tied high upon the rider's head. Pace let his hand slide away, and waited, his smooth face expressionless and flat, although a mild interest glittered in his eyes.

The girl held the horse at a slow walk, and stopped three feet from him. He saw the small oval face, and the pale gray eyes watching him with a level neutrality. Her mouth was small and full, and the corners played upward, as if a smile eternally lurked there, but never quite breaking the surface. She shifted in the saddle, and he saw that she was shapely with the fullness of young womanhood. Her voice was quiet, and the huskiness of it startled him. "I don't believe I ever saw you around here before."

He smiled at her left-handed fishing for information, but he was an open young man, and said, "That's right. I just rode in this morning, a few minutes before you topped the ridge." He waved a hand toward the collapsing buildings. "This is my place—such as it is."

"You actually bought this place from old man Wooten?" Her voice was filled with amazement.

"Yep!" he said, and toyed with the thong on his hat, knowing for certain then that he had done another foolish thing by buying the property.

She smiled to ease the words, and said, "Knowing old man Wooten, I'll bet he drew blood for it too."

Frank Pace smiled sheepishly, and said mildly, "Yes, ma'am, I guess he did. I paid a hundred and fifty dollars for it." He flicked his eyes to her, suddenly curious. "What does it mean to you?" he wanted to know.

She laughed at the serious expression on his face, and said, "When I was twelve, old man Wooten sold me a wind-broke horse for four dollars, practically my life's savings. I always wanted to meet someone as foolish as I was." She stuck out a small hand, and he took it in his. "My name is June McCall, and I can't go on calling you 'foolish', can I?"

He remembered his hat then, and took it off so quickly that he dropped it. Confusion gripped him, and he muttered, "Frank Pace," and lapsed into a red-faced silence.

She placed her hands on her thighs like a man, and asked, "Well, Frank, what do you intend to do with it . . . now that it's yours?"

He scratched his head. "Cattle . . . I guess." His voice was level and serious. "There's enough water, and plenty of grass. A few head of horses, maybe, after I get a hay crop in and the buildings fixed up."

"That," she pointed out, "takes money. Or are you the scion of a cattle baron?"

"No, ma'am! I got my rifle, a second-hand sixgun, horse and saddle, and thirty dollars in my jeans. But," he pointed out proudly, "I ain't a damned bit scared of hard work, and I figure that I'm as bull-headed as the next man when it comes to seeing the finish of something."

She swung from the horse, and said, "Let's take a good look around." She waited for him to dismount, and walked beside him with a long, leggy stride. "Cowboy," she said, "any man that will tackle a thing like this with thirty dollars in his pocket . . . well, here's wishing you luck, because you'll need it." They stepped inside the cabin, and Frank brushed the cobwebs away from the door with his hat. "Whew!" She exclaimed. "What a bear's nest! It's nearly as bad as when the old man lived here."

"You knew him well?"

"Heavens, yes! Why, I was raised around here, except for a few years when I was a little girl. My father owns the Rafter M . . . a big ranch in these parts." She wiped a hand across the dusty table, and turned to him. "I'll tell you what—you get a fire going and a bucket of water, and I'll scrub this place out to where it's fit to live in."

"I couldn't let you do that, June." He twirled his hat in his hands, surprised and embarrassed by her offer. He looked at her, and read the open friendliness there. She stood before him, with nothing false about her. She let him read her, making no excuses for herself. She was straight and true, like a fine rifle shot into the black. He smiled at her then, and said, "All right, partner. We'll clean it out together," and almost ran out of the cabin, whistling to himself.

CHAPTER 2 Gun Challenge

They lost themselves in work until late afternoon. Frank Pace had little idea of where the time went, but the talk helped to make it go quickly. He told her of meeting the old man in Kansas, and buying the place sight unseen. He talked of Dodge City, and the gunfighters there; Wyatt Earp, Neal Brown, Charlie Bassett, Pony Deal, and the inscrutable Luke Short. He mentioned the long drives up the trail from Texas, skimming over his dangerous experiences with a casual indifference.

He listened while she told him of herself, and of a life that was as free as his own. They left huge gaps in their conversation, knowing they would fill them later, knowing they would meet again and again. There was that call between them, and he wanted to lean forward and touch her, knowing that she desired it, but he forced his will to beat down his desire.

Frank laid out his bedroll on the pole bunk while she washed at the watering trough. The room had a strong soapy smell, and the single window let in light through four clean panes. The rough-hewn floor had been scrubbed clean, and a fresh layer of pine needles laid a heady fragrance in the room. He threw another stick of wood in the fire, and paused, hearing her voice. He frowned and crossed to the door, pausing again as he heard the heavy voice of a man over running the softer tones of the girl.

He scooped up his gunbelt, and charged around the cabin, coming to a sliding halt by the corner. He sucked in his breath sharply, and reached for his gun as the old man turned his hard eyes on him. "What's the matter, sonny?" the old man asked. "You gonna shoot me?"

"I guess not," Frank said. "I'm a little jumpy, that's all." He watched the old man carefully.

A white handlebar mustache hid his mouth, and he turned back to the girl, and said harshly, "You heard me now . . . *Git!* I don't ever want to catch you around here again!"

The girl stood with her head down.

Frank's voice cracked, "You take it easy there! Don't get hard nosed about nothin'!"

The old man turned his head back, and said ominously, "She's mine to talk to as I damn please . . . so keep your nose out of it. When you get kids of your own, you can do as you please, but right now, keep your yap shut." He swung around to the girl, and yelled, *"Dammit now, mind me! Or do I have to use a quirt on ya?"* He sat his horse, gaunt and old with eyes aflame until she mounted and rode away without looking back.

Frank Pace waited until June rode out of earshot, and controlled his temper with an effort. "Now I'll tell you something. This is my place, and if I ever see you on it again, I'll tack your wrinkled old hide to the barn door."

The old man leaned forward in the saddle, and his eyes burned into the boy like a hot branding iron. "I never let a man threaten me, sonny . . . never." He let his eyes flick to the boy's gun, and added, "A kid like you must get around a good deal. See a lot of things that maybe he hadn't oughta see—things that might be dangerous."

Frank locked his legs to keep them from trembling, and said calmly, "Get the mush out of your mouth and say what you want to say. Then get out!" He hooked his left thumb in his cartridge belt, a few inches from the butt of his gun, and waited.

Old Man McCall watched the boy with an open hatred. "I been lookin' at your pony . . . especially the tracks. 'Pears like I seen them before, and recent."

Frank realized that the old man knew him then, and ran the boldest course. "You ought to stop snooping around water holes at night, then." Frank grinned when the old man sucked in his breath with a raw tearing sound.

"A man dies easy in this country." The old man warned softly.

"Sure, I know how easy they die." Frank said. "I saw one die, but just remember, the old ones die easy, too." He moved his hand and touched the butt of his Colt. "You'd like to draw on me, wouldn't you? You old prune-faced goat . . . but you ain't made up your mind about me yet, have you? You can't get it through your head how a snot-nosed kid has the gall to cuss you out unless he was sure he was a hell of a lot faster on the draw than you." Frank pulled his lips into what was to pass as a wicked grin, and begged, "Go on—reach for it! Try your luck! What the hell . . . you can't expect to live forever."

The old man paled, and asked shakily, "What do you expect me to do—let you live to shoot off your mouth?"

"You ain't gonna do a damn thing!" Frank said emphatically. "I came into this country to ranch, and I'm content to mind my own business. I don't give a damn whose dog bites who, or who gets shot in the bulrushes. As for you, I never saw you before today, and that's the way it will be until you get proddy and start crowding me." Frank paused to let the words soak in, and added, "Now let's see you make that pony run."

The old man shook with rage and frustration, but he wheeled his horse, and galloped from the yard. Frank waited until he had topped the ridge before turning back toward the cabin. A smile creased his face, and he let his hand streak across his body toward his gun. He jerked it from the holster, and it spun out of his hand, landing in the grass three feet away from him. He cursed good-naturedly, and picked it up. He hefted it once, and cocked it, aiming for the plowshare rusting by the barn.

The .44-40 squalled and recoiled against his palm, and a chip flew from the barn door, ten feet away from his target. He stuffed the gun back into the leather, and muttered to himself, "Damn, boy, but you're shootin' fool!" He walked into his new home, lips pursed, whistling silently to himself.

HE PAUSED, laying the spade aside, and surveyed the result of two months' labor. A small pole corral had been erected south of the barn, and three calves bawled forlornly in protest against their captivity. North of the cabin, a meat cache stood on four long poles, and two fresh elk hides were tacked to the barn door, flesh side out to dry. Fresh cut logs lay against the now straight wall of the barn, waiting to be notched during the winter, while the back side of the cabin was banked with neat rows of firewood.

Frank daubed at the sweat running down his lean cheeks, and wiped the sweatband of his hat before glancing into the timber. He saw her as she mounted the crest of the hill, and he felt his heart hammer oddly as she galloped from the gentle slope. He walked to meet her, and she flung herself from the horse with a hurried motion. He took her hand, and they walked silently toward the cabin. "Your dad will raise hell if he finds out you've been coming here to see me."

"Let's worry about that when he catches me, shall we?" She stopped, and looked around her approvingly. "See, my faith in you has been justified."

"I don't tag along on that," Frank said.

She took his arms, and said huskily, "Remember me telling you that it would take quite a man to do it on thirty dollars?" He nodded, and she waved her arm. "Look at what you've done already. Why, in three years you'll be making enough money to support a—" She flushed, and added lamely, "Anyway, enough to live on."

He took her gently by the shoulders, and said, "June, thanks for sending Olaf Pedersen over with grub . . . and Ben Cardigan and Tanner with those calves." He looked down at his hands, and said, "I don't know how I'll ever pay 'em back."

He didn't see the look in her eyes as she said, "Cowboy," softly, and touched him on the arm. "Frank," she said huskily, her voice rolling over him, shaking him. Her eyes were soft and warm when he looked at them, and he had the distinct feeling he was going to be swallowed up in their pale depths. He cleared his throat, and it broke the spell. He kicked himself for being a fool. She turned away from him then, confused by her own emotions, and deftly changed the subject. "You've never told me what happened between you and dad after I left that day."

He toed the grass with his boot, not wanting to lie to her, but searching for an answer that would satisfy her. "Nothing out of the ordinary, I guess. Just a little hard talk on both sides to let each other know where we stood, that's all."

"I saw him when he came home, and something terrible was bothering him. He brushed right past me like I wasn't there and went into his room with a bottle of whiskey. He didn't come out or go to bed until late 'cause I heard him stomping around at three in the morning." She came against him suddenly, and put her arms around him. "Frank, I'm afraid of him. I . . . I think he hates me sometimes, the way he looks at me."

He held her quietly for several minutes, deep in thought. He wished he could think of something to say that would ease her, but realized that he would end up telling her the truth if he ever started talking. He knew that it was something she would never forgive him for, and the problem knotted his brow. He looked over her head, letting his eyes travel the length of the ridge. He stiffened, and she moved away from him, and said, "What?"

He pointed, turning her until she faced the hills, and stood with his hands on her shoulders. "Looks like the cat is out for sure now. Here comes your dad, and he has a friend with him." She shrank against him, and they stood there, watching the two men cross the meadow and halt in the yard.

The old man glared at the boy for a brief, hate-filled instant, and then moved his eyes

to June. "I thought I warned you never to come here again!" he bellowed. She clamped her lips tightly together, and his eyes widened when she lifted her chin defiantly. "Dad blast you! I seen that look before. Your mother used to stick her chin out like that, but it never done her any good." He paused to suck in a ragged breath, and yelled, "Well, what are you waiting for? Get back home before I blister you!"

Her voice was low and husky, and Frank detected the hard-willed defiance behind the quiver. "I'll go when I get good and ready, Father."

Jubal McCall gasped, and kneed the horse a pace closer. The other, a calm-faced, heavy set man shifted position, and Frank lifted his gun in one smooth motion, centering the bore on Jubal McCall's belt buckle. The other man said quietly, "Put the gun away, son."

"It ain't heavy," Frank said flatly, and eared the hammer back. "One step closer and I'll dump you out of the saddle," he told Jubal.

The horse fidgeted again, and Jubal said tightly, "Dammit, I can't help it if the horse moves, can I."

"He's your horse," Frank told him. "Make him mind or get a bullet in you."

The heavy set man moved a pace closer, his broad, stupid face flat and unreadable. Frank flicked his eyes over him, saying, "I can include you in that offer, if you want to play."

June touched him lightly on the arm then, and said, "Frank, this is Arnie Reinmiller, the sheriff."

"Howdy, Sheriff," Frank said, and kept the gun steady.

REINMILLER raised a hand, saying, "Now we can settle this thing peaceful like, can't we?"

"Ask him." Frank pointed to the old man. "Every time he comes around he paws the dirt with blood in his eye. One of these days he's gonna get careless, and reach for that Peacemaker, and I'll be forced to blast him right out of this vale of tears."

Reinmiller touched Jubal on the arm, and said finally, "All right, then, get off the kid's corn so he'll take that damned gun out of our bellies. We won't get anywhere sittin' here looking down the bore." He moved his eyes back to Frank Pace, and said, "I'd like to ask you a few questions, if you don't mind."

"Ask 'em." Frank invited, and shoved the gun into his holster, leaving his hand curled agound the butt.

"Where did you come from, son?"

"Texas, near Amarillo. Where did you come from?"

"Missouri, down near the southern—" Reinmiller caught himself, and flushed. "Never you mind where I'm from. Were you in the war?"

"I'm twenty," Frank said, "and this is Seventy-eight. You figure it out." His eyes narrowed, and he asked, "What is this, anyway? I haven't been off the place since I got here."

"What did you do before you got here?" Reinmiller inquired quietly.

"Chased cattle, played a little cards, treed a town or two . . . maybe killed a couple of men, but it sure ain't any of your damn business."

The sheriff let out a long breath, and glanced at Jubal McCall, who watched the boy with a steady gaze. "We turned up a dead man a while back. Found him by a spring just fifteen miles from here. He'd been shot to death, and then kicked. I kinda wondered what you knew about it."

"Why should I know anything about it?" Frank asked mildly.

"Well," Reinmiller said. "Jubal here found the body a few days after it happened and a bunch of pony tracks. Those tracks match your pony to a tee, son."

"All right," Frank agreed. "I stopped there on my way in to water my mare."

"You could have stopped there to kill a man, too." Reinmiller shifted in the saddle. "I hear that you're faster'n hell with that gun. I also heard of another jasper that could be you. Same build, blue-eyed with blond hair, and he wears his gun cross-draw like you do. They call him Laredo Jack. Maybe you're this Laredo hombre, hired to kill this fella."

"So you think I was hired to kill a man?"

"Now I didn't say that! I was just supposin'," Reinmiller said testily. "But your tracks was there . . . around the water hole and back of the junipers where you hid. Jubal saw the tracks, and I saw 'em. They put you there, all right."

"What about Jubal's pony tracks? Didn't you see them too?"

"Of course I saw 'em!" Reinmiller said exasperatedly. "Do you think I'm a fool? I saw where he rode in, and where he rode out when he discovered the body."

Frank stifled a trapped feeling inside of him, realizing how neatly Jubal McCall had woven his story. He had no doubts as to how it would end. He was new here, and if he was lucky enough to get to town alive, a pistol bullet crashing into his cell would stop his tongue. He tried to judge the intelligence of the sheriff, and took a long chance.

"Look, Sheriff . . . was my pony tracks under the body? If they was, then I must have rode my horse under him." Frank watched the lawman's eyes grow puzzled, and he talked faster. "Besides, if they wasn't under the body, then I must have got there after he was dead, not before . . . and if they was under the body, then I couldn't have shot him there because they wouldn't have been there if I had." He knew his talk didn't make sense, and grinned when Reinmiller's mouth dropped open.

"I'll be damned!" Reinmiller exclaimed. "To tell you the truth, I never looked. I left Jubal to bury the body and rode back to town." He looked at the old man, and asked, "What about it, Jubal?"

The old man showed a moment of uncertainty, and his mouth tightened beneath the mustache. "I couldn't say," he grumbled, and studied his crossed hands on the saddle horn.

The sheriff slapped his thigh, and said, "Well, I guess that settles that for now. I never arrest a man until I have an airtight case against him." He wheeled his horse, and asked over his shoulder, "Comin' Jubal?"

The old man grumbled, "Be along later," and watched the sheriff cut into the hills. He turned back to Frank Pace and his fists were clenched. "I made a mistake with you, kid. You're smart, and I didn't make allowances for it. You talked fast to Reinmiller and got him rattled. You guessed that he was a stubborn old fool that locked his jaws on anything he believed in. You got him to doubt himself, and if I went in and told him different, he'd get on his high horse and throw me out of his office."

"What's the idea of sicking him on me in the first place? Couldn't you leave well enough alone?" Frank asked.

"Watch your tongue, you young pup!" Jubal shouted. "I ain't through with you yet!"

June thrust herself between them. "Dad! What's the matter with you? Why do you have it in for Frank? He never did anything to you."

He raised his hand as if to strike, and said gruffly, "Nothin' . . . none of your danged business. Now go home like I told you!"

She stomped her foot, and her lovely face was an angry red. "I'll go when I get good and ready, so stop ordering me around like a hired hand. I want to know what's going on around here."

Jubal moved the horse until his back was turned to her. He turned his head to watch Frank Pace, and said softly, "You didn't think I'd let it lay, did you?" He grinned

wickedly. "I couldn't live with a thing like that hangin' over me. You worry me, son, and I don't like to have things worry me."

"Like you worried for the last eighteen years?" Frank taunted him, and watched the killing temper wash over the old man's eyes.

Old Jubal's voice was a low hiss. "You'd better get out of this country fast. You're done around here." He swung to the girl, and asked, "Are you comin' or not?"

She looked at Frank, leaving the decision up to him. He touched her gently. "Go with him, but come back soon."

She watched him with moist eyes, and said huskily, "Nothing in this world could keep me away from you," and crossed the yard to swing up on her pony. Frank watched them ride out, the girl a length behind the old man. They disappeared over the crown of the hill, and he turned to the cabin, oddly saddened by her leaving.

CHAPTER 3 Ride for Life!

Frank Pace tossed in a fitful sleep, the covers thrown back against the log wall. The fire flickered feebly, sending long shadows against the wall, making the table stand out as a skinny-legged monster in the center of the room. He twisted on the straw mattress, and jerked himself awake as a boot toe stubbed his three-legged stool.

He had a flash, an instant in which to prepare himself, and he saw the old man, a dark shadow crouched a few feet away from him. The ghostly shadows danced, and Frank rolled off the bunk as the .45 Peacemaker roared and belched fire.

The sound filled the room, deafened him, and the flare from the muzzle blinded him as he dived under the table. Sound filled the room again, and a long splinter of wood flew in front of his face. He knew he was too far from his gun, and slid away, close to the wall as the old man shot again, searching him out with lead.

Frank coiled his muscles, and sprang to his feet, sending the water bucket into the fireplace with one long sweep of his arm. He heard the gun go off again, and a heavy hand struck him in the side above the hip, driving him to his knees. He heard the old man thrashing around in the darkness, trying to find him, and he threw the stool weakly into the far corner. The Peacemaker roared again, and Frank dove out the door, crying out against set lips as the pain in his side knifed through him. He made his feet as the old man boiled from the cabin, frantically trying to thumb fresh shells into his gun.

Frank realized that he had a chance then, and ran to the barn, doubled over against the pain. He swung the door aside with an effort that left him weak and sweating, and felt the blood soak his jeans. He heard the old man running toward him, and the night erupted orange again as Frank hurriedly slipped a hackamore on the mare. He grubbed the mane, and pulled himself on her, bareback, and ducked low as Jubal shot again. He rapped the mare with his bare heels, and she stormed out of the yard. He heard Jubal yelling, and another bullet sang through the pines as he made the timber fifty yards north of his cabin.

He didn't know if it was the pain, or the cold, or the fear of pursuit that kept him awake. His teeth chattered in the predawn cold, and his bare feet felt like two stumps of ice. He wore no shirt, and tried to pull the shrunken sleeves of his long underwear down over his arms, but gave it up. Time wore on for him with agonizing slowness. He was aware of movement, and knew that he had been traveling for hours. He had no idea where he was, and let the mare pick her own way.

He didn't remember falling from the horse, but the mare nudged him awake, silently reminding him that he couldn't remain there. It took four attempts to make her back, only to promptly roll off the other side. He gave up then, realizing he had to

stay where he was; he could go no farther. Frank tried to crawl, to seek some shelter. He braced himself weakly on his hands and knees, listening with half a mind to a vaguely familiar gurgle.

He crawled another six feet, and stuck his arms in the spring up to the elbows. The cold water shocked him, and he crawled to the clump of junipers where he had once hidden, and rolled over on his back, letting the blackness wash over him.

Frank was aware that hands touched him, and he struck out blindly. He heard her voice then, as if from a deep corridor, and felt her soft hands on his torn side. He slept fitfully, trying to cry out against the hand across his mouth. Dreams came and went. Horrible dreams that had no beginning and no end, and when he tried to examine them closely in his delirium, they had no middle. Great disjointed bodies pursued him, and his legs felt like lead when he tried to run away from them. He tried to fight them, and they poured over him, overwhelming him; smothering him with soft bodies that had no substance.

HE OPENED his eyes, and she was kneeling beside him, her dark hair around her shoulders, and the pinched lines of fatigue pulled at the corners of her full mouth. "You're better." She said softly. "You had me very worried, Frank."

He tried to speak, and his voice felt as rusty as an old pump. "How long have I been here, June?"

She held up two fingers. "I found you around noon the first day. I heard dad ride out that night, and I followed. I heard the shooting, and took out after you, but I lost you in the darkness." She drew a ragged, weary breath. "When it was light enough, I picked up your trail again."

"Am I hit bad?"

"You have a hunk of meat out of you the size of a lamb chop, but it could have been worse." Her eyes clouded, and she closed them, squeezing a tear out on each cheek. "Frank," she whispered. "What does it mean? What is behind this? What has possessed him to do a thing like this?"

"It's in the man's mind." He evaded. "Sometimes a man goes a little crazy just from thinking too much. Maybe he hates me because you and I like each other. He could be jealous . . . afraid I was going to take you away from him."

"Jealous!" She spat the word out scornfully. "He doesn't have any feelings toward me, nothing but a warped sense of possession . . . and hate. It's been that way since I can remember. He hated my mother, and hounded her until she died. Now he's transferred that hate to me."

She took his hand, and her pale eyes pleaded with him. "Frank, I'm frightened. I've been frightened since I've been a little girl, but it wasn't until now that I realize that it's my father I'm frightened of. He seems like a stranger to me . . . he's always seemed that way." She paused, and the thicket echoed the quiet. A small animal in the brush moved, and afterward, silence fell like a damp sheet.

"There has always been something vague in the back of my mind, but until now I've never tried to put it into words. I keep getting the feeling that there was someone else . . . another man I called daddy. I've dreamed about him, and he was kind to me, but the dream ends, and when I wake up, he is gone and I have a new and different daddy." She wiped a tired hand across her face, and said desperately, "I'm so lonely—so mixed up. Sometimes I don't know where the dream ends and life begins."

Frank Pace pulled her against him, and she cried softly. He stroked her back gently, and said, "It's all right . . . it's all right."

Behind him, Jubal McCall's voice said, "Just like your mother. The first pair of pants that rides out of the brush, and you take off to be with him." He stepped around in front of them, the Peacemaker held hip high. "I had a devil of a time trackin' you, Pace. You lost me completely

until I went home and found her missing. I put two and two together, and figured that she'd find you . . . her eyes are better than mine. Her pony was easy to follow. He don't step as gentle as your mare."

The girl shrank against Frank Pace, and asked softly, "Dad! Are you out of your mind?"

A gray stubble dotted the old man's face, and he watched them with red rimmed eyes. "Not the way you mean." He motioned to his daughter with his gun, and said, "Get away from him. I'm gonna kill him."

She locked her arms around Frank, crying, "Then you'll shoot through me to do it!" The old man growled something in his throat, and struck her, knocking her aside. Frank felt his stomach muscles quiver as the old man snarled, "Stand on your hind feet. I hate to shoot a man when he's on the ground."

Frank rolled over and tried to push himself erect. He clamped his jaws shut against the burning pain, and thought he was going to be sick. He swayed on his feet, and Jubal McCall stepped to within three feet of him. Frank heard June move in the grass, but kept his eyes on the old man's face. He tried to still the wild beating of his heart, and gave up trying. He forced his mind to think clearly, and realized that nothing he could say would stop the bullet. A fatalism crowded him then, and he thought, *What the hell . . . I can prod him and get it over with quicker.*

Young Pace took a deep breath, and said, "So you killed her father, and now you're gonna kill me 'cause I saw you do it?"

"She ain't his! She's mine!" Jubal gripped the gun tighter.

"But you don't know that, do you? There ain't no way of bein' sure, and the not knowing is driving you out of your mind. Remember what *he* said? He said, 'maybe she wasn't yours'."

"Shut up!" he screamed, his old face a twisted mask of hate and suspicion. "Shut up before I kill ya!"

"Why don't you shoot me?" Frank asked. "You couldn't shoot her father either until he drove you crazy with his talk. That was the only way a yellow old goat like you could get up nerve to pull the trigger." Frank watched the old man's eyes smear over, and yelled, "Look at her, Jubal! Look at her eyes! You saw them same eyes looking at you when you killed her father. Look into her eyes and tell me she's yours!" He watched the old man stare openmouthed at the girl. Frank saw knowledge crowd out the unbelief in his face, gripping tightly with the awful truth.

Tears ran down the old man's seamed face, and he beat his fist against his thigh. "It's so!" He sobbed. "I see it for a fact. You ain't my kid . . . you never was my kid." He rubbed a sleeve across his dripping nose, and confronted the terrified girl. "But I'm laughin' because he came back for you and I caught him and killed him—your own father." His mind drifted a moment, and he muttered. "Your mother was no good . . . never loved me, same as you never loved me."

Frank saw him swing the gun toward her, and gathering his failing strength, drove a knotted fist into the old man's face.

THE gun went off by his ear, deafening him, and he struck again, falling with the blow; carrying the old man backward off his feet. He rolled with Jubal under him, looping blows into the snarling whiskered face. He felt a jolt on his shoulder, and ducked as Jubal tried to break his skull with the gun. He dodged another blow, and grabbed the Peacemaker.

The gnarled thumb eared the hammer back, and Frank summoned his remaining strength and twisted as it went off. The old man let out a bubbling sigh, and rolled away to lie face down, his boots beating a staccato on the packed ground by the spring. He tried to raise himself, looking at the girl with one hate-filled glance before falling forward to lie still.

Frank collapsed weakly, and the slight sounds flowed around him, broken by the girl's quiet sobbing. A twig snapped behind him, and he rolled toward the fallen gun. His fingers closed around the bone handle, and a boot stepped gently on his wrist. Arnie Reinmiller's hand took the Peacemaker away from him, as he said, "No sense of a man gettin' shot by mistake, now, is there?"

Frank rolled his head, and looked at June. She tore her eyes away from the dead man and came to him, rolling him so his head was in her lap. The sheriff toed Jubal once, and June's soft crying was a sighing sound in the silence. The creek murmured gently, and Arnie Reinmiller let out a long sigh. He turned and stood over the boy, saying, "He never would have shot you, son. I had a gun on him all the time . . . there in those bushes." He took off his hat and made a vague motion with his hand. "You know, I got half way to town before I realized you'd slickered me with that crazy talk about tracks." He chuckled. "I guess when a man gets older, he gets soft in the head . . . like me thinkin' you could be the man called Laredo Jack." He let the talk sag, and nodded toward Jubal. "Hate sure didn't carry him very far, did it?"

He picked the makin's from his vest, and asked, "Do you smoke, son?" and when Frank nodded, rolled him a cigarette. "No," he added, "hate ain't what I'd call a permanent foundation to build a man's life on, although there is men fool enough to try it. The girl there, she knows what it is like. She's lived with Jubal and that was all he knew."

"But you, son," he tapped Frank on the chest. "You don't know what it is, and I hope you never find out." He stood up and stretched, yawning hugely. "Well, I been up all night following Jubal, and I ain't as young as I used to be." He turned, as if to leave, and then came back to stand over the girl. He touched her gently on the head, and she looked at him. "No one can say a few magic words and erase the loss and misery of this thing, but time will help. You better take this boy home with you and take good care of him. He's a fine man."

He left them then, reappearing a moment later as he led his horse from an alder thicket. He pulled himself into the saddle wearily, and said, "I guess I better head back to town." He paused, rolling the words around on his tongue, and added, "Be glad to tell the parson to stop out in a few days."

Frank tilted his head and looked at her, and she smiled. He saw the pain in her eyes and he knew that it would never totally erase, but what the devil—he'd started to ranch with thirty dollars in his pocket—this wasn't such a bad gamble.

He winked at the lawman, and said evenly, "I'd be obliged, Sheriff." • • •

REAL ESTATE probably never increased in value as rapidly anywhere, ever, as it did in San Francisco in 1848. Take the case of a man who died in that city, owing approximately $41,000. Yet, by the time his administrators got around to settling up for the heirs, the "valueless" property he'd owned, had hiked so high in value that every single debt was cleared with ease. Furthermore, each heir derived a yearly income of $40,000. The people who had to dig for their fortunes in the locality that year did mighty fine also. According to an extremely modest calculation, $5,000,000 worth of gold was scratched from the ground during the first season of the Rush. This figure is obtained by estimating that approximately 5,000 men were panning, and collected approximately $1,000 apiece. *Ritter*

LAST RIDE

By JAMES PROPP

Every time he hit the ground, the jolt rocked Durand's head back. . . .

A wise bronc rider knows when it's time to hang up his spurs. But who ever accused this break-neck, reckless, riding fool of being wise?

CHET DURAND flipped his cigarette away and walked into Rock City's Rodeo Headquarters. He had never thought he would be riding in rodeos again. Not after paying out his long-saved winnings for the little cow spread he now owned. Rodeo was a losing game if you

stuck it out to the end. His father had been stove up by broncs. That wasn't for Chet Durand. But what was a fellow to do when a blizzard wiped out all his cattle?

"Just what I'm doing," he muttered. A year's lay-off shouldn't bother his riding and dogging. If luck was with him he'd make enough to get back in the cattle business. And this time he'd have a stake to fall back on if something happened. He'd ride until he got it.

Posters of coming rodeos were on the walls. An old man with a bristling mustache sat behind a paper-littered desk. "Was gonna close the books. What you enterin'?"

"Saddle broncs and doggin'."

He handed Durand the entry sheets and Chet shook his head as he scribbled his name on the bronc list. Take some riding to beat those boys. On the dogging list, Toby Bowers' name jumped out at him. With luck he could win in broncs, but Bowers was world champion bulldogger.

"Tough competition," the old man grinned. "This rodeo draws the big uns. Leah Landers put it on and she works out a humdinger."

Hearing that name did something to Chet. For the past year Leah had been only a wistful memory. Well, it was over with now. Why dredge up old wounds?

He counted out his money. He even had to part with the torn bill patched with tape that he'd carried as a lucky bill. That's how broke he was. Waiting for his receipt, Durand glanced at a rodeo poster.

This one was to be at Box Springs. It was only a few miles from here. Be a good one to take in next. Then he saw the conflicting dates. It started tomorrow! Bad business. But from the looks of the lists here, Rock City wouldn't be short of contestants.

"Well, Chet Durand, ex-rodeo chump."

Chet pulled a tight rein on his temper when he saw Judd Kirby standing in the door. He looked like he'd prospered since the last time. Flashy suit and all the trimmings. Good looking, if it wasn't for his too-big jaw.

"You furnishing stock for this rodeo, Kirby?"

"Sold my stock to Miss Landers," Kirby puffed at a black cigar. "I'm investing now in anything good."

"You mean a lead pipe cinch," Durand said sourly.

"I'm a modest fellow," Judd grinned. "Let's talk about you. Thought you'd lost your guts. Surprised to see you taking another slug at rodeo."

Chet clenched his fists, but the old man cut in. "Here's your receipt. Better git to the rodeo grounds right away if you don't want to miss out on the drawing for today's go-round."

Brushing past Kirby, Chet went out, his anger as hard as his fists. Kirby was asking for it—just like the last time they'd met. But Chet didn't have time. Had to make that drawing.

"Leah's kinda sour on you," Kirby called after him. "She's her own arena director, too. So you can't put anything over on her."

Durand kept on walking, remembering the last time he'd tangled with Kirby. The big man had doped one of his own steers so that a man he had bet on could win. But Chet had found out in time to have the arena director take the steer out. And Durand had won.

AT THE rodeo grounds the drawing was under way and Chet Durand pushed his way into the crowd of cowboys. Leah Landers was in the center shuffling the slips in a hat. For that moment, Durand forgot everything but the girl in soft buckskin which matched her blonde hair. The buckskin shirt and divided skirt were beaded with Indian designs. His eyes searched her pretty face and found it just as he remembered. Soft red lips and sky blue eyes.

Suddenly, he was conscious of his appearance. Rubbing a two-day stubble on

his chin, he glanced down at his faded brown pants and scuffed boots. He edged back into the crowd as Leah began calling contestants' names.

His name wouldn't be on that list because he'd entered late. He watched the cowboys draw and drift away toward the stock pens. Smiling, Durand remembered doing the same thing himself. You couldn't help looking at what you'd drawn; from trying to foresee the outcome.

"Didn't you draw?" Leah's voice made him face the present. He turned slowly and looked into those cool blue eyes. A nice warm feeling spread over him as a smile broke over her face.

"Chet!" she cried. "What are you doing here?"

Grinning, he handed her his entry slip.

"Good." Her smile widened. "It's going to be like old times, you riding again." She held out the hat. "Take your pick cowboy, and I hope it starts you back to your championship again."

"Not that," Durand said as he drew a slip. "I'm just riding to make enough to get back in the cattle business."

"Oh," Leah said, and the smile slipped from her face. "I thought you were going to. . . ."

She let it drop and Durand felt the anger roil up in him. So she, too, thought he'd lost his nerve. She hadn't said that, but the way she talked reminded him of what a cowboy had told an old bronc rider who had refused to ride a killer bronc. "You're yellowing with age, Pop."

He handed her the slip without looking at it.

"Stargazer," she said. "Fit a ride on him and you got day money. Number nineteen's the only dogging steer left."

She wrote his name after the bronc and steer, then turned to leave. "I've got work to do before this show gets under way. Good luck, Chet."

Watching her walk away, Durand clenched his fists. He'd show her, Kirby and all of them that he hadn't lost his nerve. Walking to the bronc pen, he looked for Stargazer. But he kept thinking of Leah. She was a girl you couldn't get out of your mind, even if you were mad at her.

He asked a cowboy to point out Stargazer and he singled out a wild-eyed bay. "Stargazer," Durand said to himself, "you're gonna get rode like you've never been rode before."

When Durand left the pen he looked up the bull doggers and made a deal with one of them to use his horse. It was a nice little buckskin that looked fast.

While they were talking, Leah Landers rode by on a high stepping palomino. She didn't even look at him. She was telling everyone, "Rodeo starts in ten minutes."

Durand hurried off toward the chutes. By the time he had found out that he was second in the bronc line up, and fixed the saddle stirrups to fit him, the calf roping was over. He had just handed the saddle to the handlers, when the first bronc tore out of the chutes.

There was not time to watch. He helped the men saddle Stargazer and climbed to the top of the chute. He heard the announcer giving an alibi for the first rider who had been thrown, and then call Durand's name.

Taking a good grip on the bucking rein, Durand settled into the saddle with a yell. The bronc shot from the chute as the gate swung open. And it didn't take Chet long to find out why they called him Sargazer.

He went as high as a comet. Every time he hit ground, the jolt rocked Durand's head back. But Chet raked him fore and aft with his spurs and rode like a reckless daredevil. He'd show them he hadn't lost his nerve.

The whistle blew and the pick up men lifted him from the bronc. "What you trying to do?" one pick up man asked. "Bust him so a kid can ride him?"

Laughing, Durand walked back to the chutes. That would show them he hadn't

lost his nerve. Leah was standing by the gate smiling at him.

"Nice riding, cowboy."

And it rankled Durand. "For an old man, I guess it was." And he saw her face go tight.

Leah started to say something, then changed her mind and walked away. Durand wanted to run after her, to say he was sorry, but something held him back.

Leah was back on her palomino, directing the show. Durand picked a spot on the fence and watched her, even though he knew he should be trying out his dogging horse. Leah sure had this show moving fast. He didn't find a slow spot on the program.

Grudgingly, Durand admitted he had missed rodeo. He had been telling himself the past year that he didn't. Now he wondered if he'd quit again when he'd made his stake.

WHEN the announcer called for the bull doggers to get ready, Durand was still absorbed in watching Leah. He went reluctantly to where he'd tied the buckskin.

Judd Kirby was leaning against the fence near the buckskin. He still had a black cigar stuck in his face.

"Well, Pappy Chet," Kirby spoke around the cigar. "I seen your bronc riding. How's your dogging?"

Clenching his jaws, Durand wanted to feel his fist tearing into Kirby's face. But he didn't have time. Toby Bowers was already behind the barrier, ready to dog. Durand mounted and started to ride away.

"In case you're interested," Kirby went on. "I'm betting that you don't even catch your steer, much less twist him down."

Riding past the big jawed man, Durand stared straight ahead. Time always seemed to keep him moving. Well, he thought savagely, if he couldn't find time soon he'd make time and knock that silly grin off Judd's face. They'd tangle before this rodeo was over.

The barrier snapped and Toby Bowers was after his steer. Durand watched him take it twenty feet from the deadline. Backing the buckskin behind the barrier, Durand noticed his faded brown pants and grinned wryly. They did look like they were yellowing with age.

"Twelve and four-fifths seconds," the announcer called Bowers' time. Durand whistled softly and glanced at his own steer. It was a big freckled gray with wide, sharp horns. He thought of Leah and he thought of Kirby. The gate opened and the freckled steer spilled out.

The buckskin lunged forward and caught the steer, but the horse shied away from the steer as Durand kicked his feet free of the stirrups and leaped. His hands barely found the steer's neck. Durand felt sharp pain shoot up his leg as his boot heels plowed into the dust. His ankle twisted sickeningly. Durand lost his grip and fell.

Limping back to the chutes, he knew he was out of the finals. There was only bronc riding now. And if he didn't win something at that he'd be dead broke. He wished he hadn't paid his lucky torn bill on his fees.

Blurring torment from his ankle made him sit down and remove his boot. The ankle was already swelling. This might lay him up for weeks.

Toby Bowers walked up and said, "You can pack your duds and scratch this rodeo off to experience."

Chet nodded. "Your ought to take dogding now."

"Guess you ain't heard," Bowers said. "Someone knocked out the old man who signed us up and stole all the rodeo money. I'm taking in the Box Springs Rodeo like some of the others. It starts tomorrow and they've doubled the prizes." He handed Chet an advertisement.

But Chet was thinking about Leah. He guessed it cost her about six thousand to put on this show. Now she'd lose it all. It gave him a sinking feeling, but there was not a thing he could do to help her. He

picked up his boot and limped toward the ambulance. The interns were taping his ankle when the cowboy who owned the buckskin came up.

"Did you tie some wire on my right stirrup?" he snapped angrily.

"Why, no," Chet answered.

"Well, somebody did. When I went to take the steer the wire gouged my buckskin and made him shy away from the steer. I damn near broke my neck."

"That's what happened to me," Durand spoke up. Then he remembered Kirby had been near the buckskin and he had said he was betting Durand wouldn't even catch his steer. Durand started to tell the cowboy this, but caught himself. He wanted the first crack at Kirby.

When his ankle was taped, they had to slit his boot to get it back on. Durand waited with a wild impatience. Now he'd settle things with Kirby once and for all.

But Kirby was not to be found, and Durand decided to stay in town. He might turn up again. And if he did—Durand would be waiting.

THAT night Chet Durand was still waiting. He was leaning against a post in front of the hotel to keep his weight off his throbbing ankle. If Kirby didn't show up tomorrow, Chet knew he'd have to head back to the ranch. He didn't even have money to eat on and it made him wonder if he'd ever get enough to start over again.

"Oh, here you are," he heard someone say and he turned to see Leah. "I've been looking all over for you, Chet. You've got to help me. I've talked some of the boys into riding for me tomorrow, but I need a few—"

Shaking his head, Durand started to tell her about his ankle, but she kept on talking.

"Please, Chet. I'll pay you out of tomorrow's admissions. If I quit now, I lose everything. I owe Judd Kirby a thousand on the stock. He's given me until tomorrow to pay all or he takes them back."

Kirby's name made Durand forget everything else. "Kirby in town?"

"No, but he said he'd be here tomorrow to get the money or the stock."

"Count me in, then," Durand said.

"You darling. I've got to get two more boys." She kissed him quick and hurried off.

Durand stood there watching her leave, a silly grin on his face. This was like old times, and he liked it. Then he felt the pain in his ankle. He knew he was a locoed fool for riding and dogging tomorrow, but he'd do anything to help Leah. And he wanted a crack at Kirby.

The next day Chet Durand's ankle was no better, but when the announcer called his name he was ready. His swollen ankle telegraphed pain and torment as he came out astraddle of a twisting, grunting bronc. He gritted his teeth against a fainting feeling and stars danced in front of his eyes as he tried to stay with the wild demon under him.

A shrilling whistle cut into his murky senses and the pick up man was lifting him free. Relief flooded him as he limped out of the arena. He knew he couldn't have stayed on another second.

Leaning against the fence to take the weight off his ankle, Durand watched the rest of the show. Leah sure made a bang up rodeo with just a handful of men. Why, she had even roped calves. Made her palomino do tricks while the broncs were being readied. And right now she was trick riding.

Then Durand saw Judd Kirby.

"What's the matter Pappy?" Kirby taunted. "Why didn't you come to Box Springs and ride with top hands? I'm backing that show. Oh, I forgot. You lost your nerve and stayed behind to ride with the scrubs."

Sharp black madness tore at Durand. So Kirby was the one who broke up Leah's show. It was a cheap trick. Chet let go, smashing a fist into Judd's grinning face.

Durand tried to follow the big man as he staggered back, but his swollen ankle twisted. He almost lost balance.

The big man came at Durand with savage, twisting face and thrashing hands. Durand was falling and he grabbed at Kirby, snagging a pocket. It ripped away and Durand sprawled on the ground. Money scattered on the ground in front of Durand, and he gasped as he recognized his lucky bill, the torn one that was patched with tape!

Kirby's boot was smashing down at Durand now, and he took the smash in his ribs, grabbing the boot and throwing Kirby. Both of them scrambled to their feet and Durand tore into Kirby with savage vengeance, fists working like trip hammers. Shock traveled up his arms as he felt blow after blow cut into Kirby's face. Then Durand knew someone was pulling him away.

"That's enough," a cowboy yelled. "Don't kill him!"

The red anger cleared from Durand's eyes slowly. He saw the ring of people around him. Leah was there. Durand pointed to the money on the ground. It was a little while longer before he could control his breathing.

"Kirby stole it . . . knocked out the old man. I can prove it."

"Come on, boys," a cowboy said angrily. "Let's take Kirby to the sheriff."

Suddenly conscious of the jagging pain in his ankle, Durand leaned against the chutes and tugged off his boot. His foot was swollen and throbbing.

"Did you ride with that ankle, Chet?" Leah demanded. But she didn't wait for Durand to answer. "I guess I'd better start where we left off last year. You need someone to look after you."

"I guess I do." Chet grinned. "All I got to my name is a bare ranch with no cattle."

"I got enough to pay off Kirby," Leah said. "But all I've got is some rodeo stock and no place to put them. Maybe we could make a deal. Pardners?"

"Okay by me," Chet grinned. "You put up the stock, I'll put up the ranch."

This was it, Chet knew. He had wanted to keep the ranch, but still follow the rodeos. Beside, he had a beautiful blonde pardner. Maybe, he could talk her into a real partnership. But he wanted to wait a while. A man just didn't propose without a cent in his pocket. • • •

Clay Enright had left his blood on his Cherokee Strip claim and his sweat on its soil. Now they said it wasn't his. But nothing would drive Clay from the land—not the treachery of a brother, the wiles of a beautiful woman, or the might of the United States Army!

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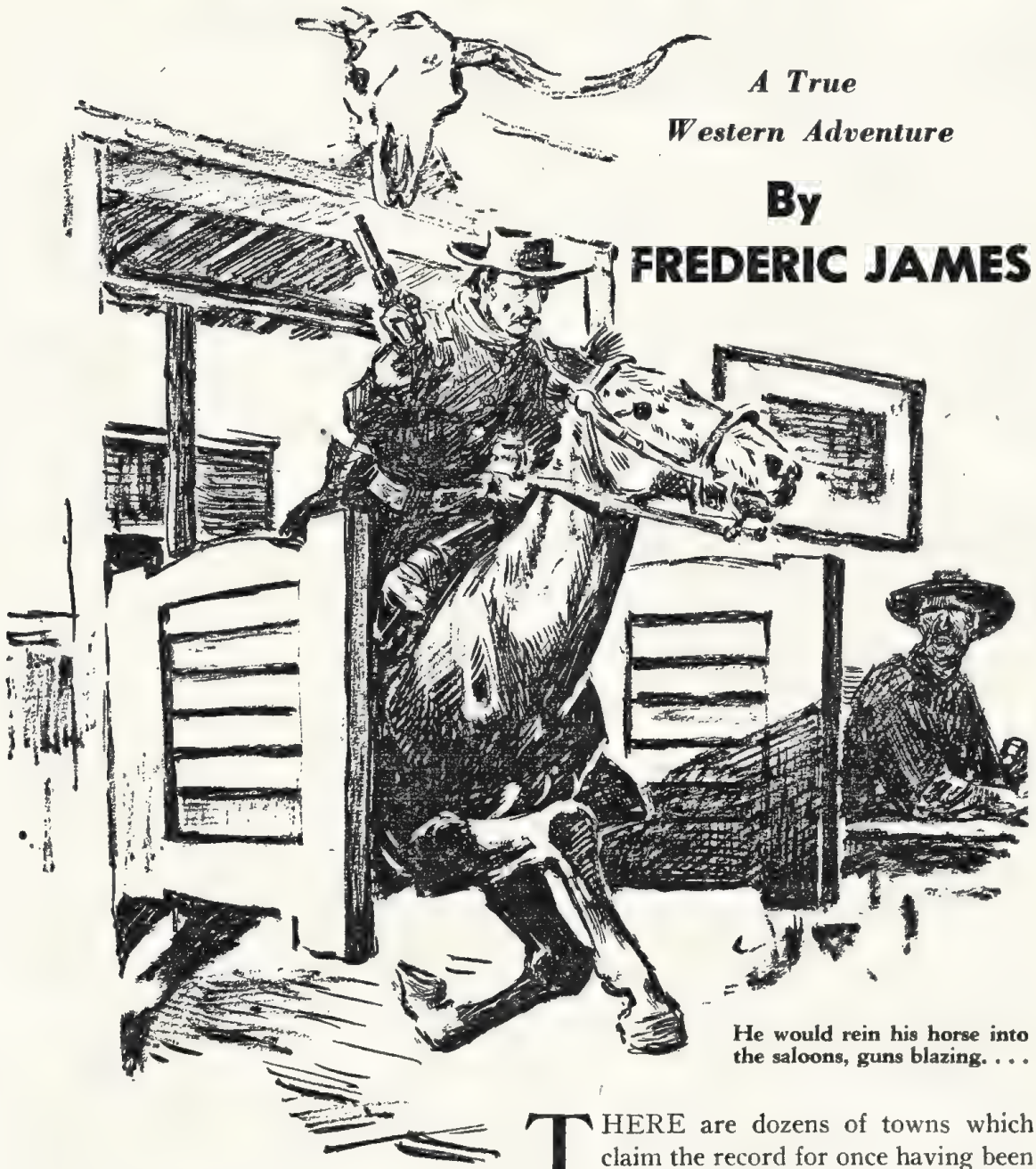

He would rein his horse into the saloons, guns blazing. . . .

What happened the night a soldier named Custer and a marshal named Hickok faced each other over drawn guns?

THERE are dozens of towns which claim the record for once having been the wildest in the West, but none has a better right to it than Fort Hays, Kansas.

Hays City, as it was called in earlier days, was a railroad town which was also located near the military post of Fort Hays. Into

its noisy streets came not only construction workers, and soldiers, but also a host of traders who made a rail connection with the old Santa Fe trail at the new prairie terminal.

With a population which was essentially male, and young, there was bound to be action night and day. If the boys sought entertainment and excitement, Hays City had it for them. Saloon keepers, gamblers, painted ladies, and gunfighters gathered from all sections of the country to take advantage of a large population of free spenders who were always ready to part with their money. Before long they found that they had moved into a lively spot.

As the town grew by leaps and bounds, and as more individualistic Westerners crowded into its slab and driftwood shanties, what had been downright lawlessness grew into perpetual riot. Even for the frontiersman, who were used to having arguments about the relative values of poker hands settled by sixguns, this was a situation which had to be brought under control. Law had to come to Hays City while there was yet somebody who was alive to regulate. So, in 1869 James B. Hickok, better known as "Wild Bill,' was made the town's marshal.

Wild Bill understood his constituents perfectly, and accordingly he made his way about town carrying two revolvers, a sawed-off shotgun and a bowie knife. He knew full well that his daily duties included fighting it out with at least one drunken citizen who though it was his duty to "choose" the marshal. As the days went on Bill added methodically to the population of Boothill—the cemetery which received those who died with their boots on.

Bill had his problems. He could take care of tough railroad workers and quarrelsome traders from Santa Fe, but the Seventh Cavalry which was stationed at the Fort nearby during the summer of 1869, caused him no end of trouble. Young Tom Custer, brother of the famous George Armstrong Custer—who was also an officer in the Seventh—had the habit of riding through town at breakneck speed and shooting up the place. He would rein his horse into the saloons, guns blazing, and scatter the customers to the winds.

THINGS came to a head one night. Tom, as usual, was riotous and Bill finally made the inevitable arrest. Tom had boasted that Hickok would never dare take him in, but when he saw that the marshal had every intention of shooting him unless he submitted, the young cavalry officer surrendered. This momentary compliance did not mean that young Custer was tamed. Far from it; he swore that he would get Wild Bill, and, good to his promise he returned to Hays after his release with three of his men, hunting for the marshal.

They found their quarry in a dimly-lit saloon and after working their way through the crowd, closed in on him. They had decided to throw him down and while two of them held him, a third would end the law-enforcing day of Wild Bill Hickok. The plan worked well enough, except that the men were not prepared for the wildcat they tackled, and before the fracas was over Bill had shot all three of his assailants while young Tom Custer stood by, mouth agape. When the trooper now tried to get more of his men to tackle the job, residents of Hays objected strenuously, and drove the troops out of town.

As the men of the Seventh rode away they threatened to return and promised that this time Bill would not be so lucky. Faced with the prospect of fighting the whole cavalry unit, the marshal became somewhat concerned but resolved to fight the thing out to the finish. Many of his friends were now worried about what promised to be a first-class war before it was finished, and begged Hickok to leave town for his own good.

Bill at first refused to listen but after a time he recognized the futility of the situa-

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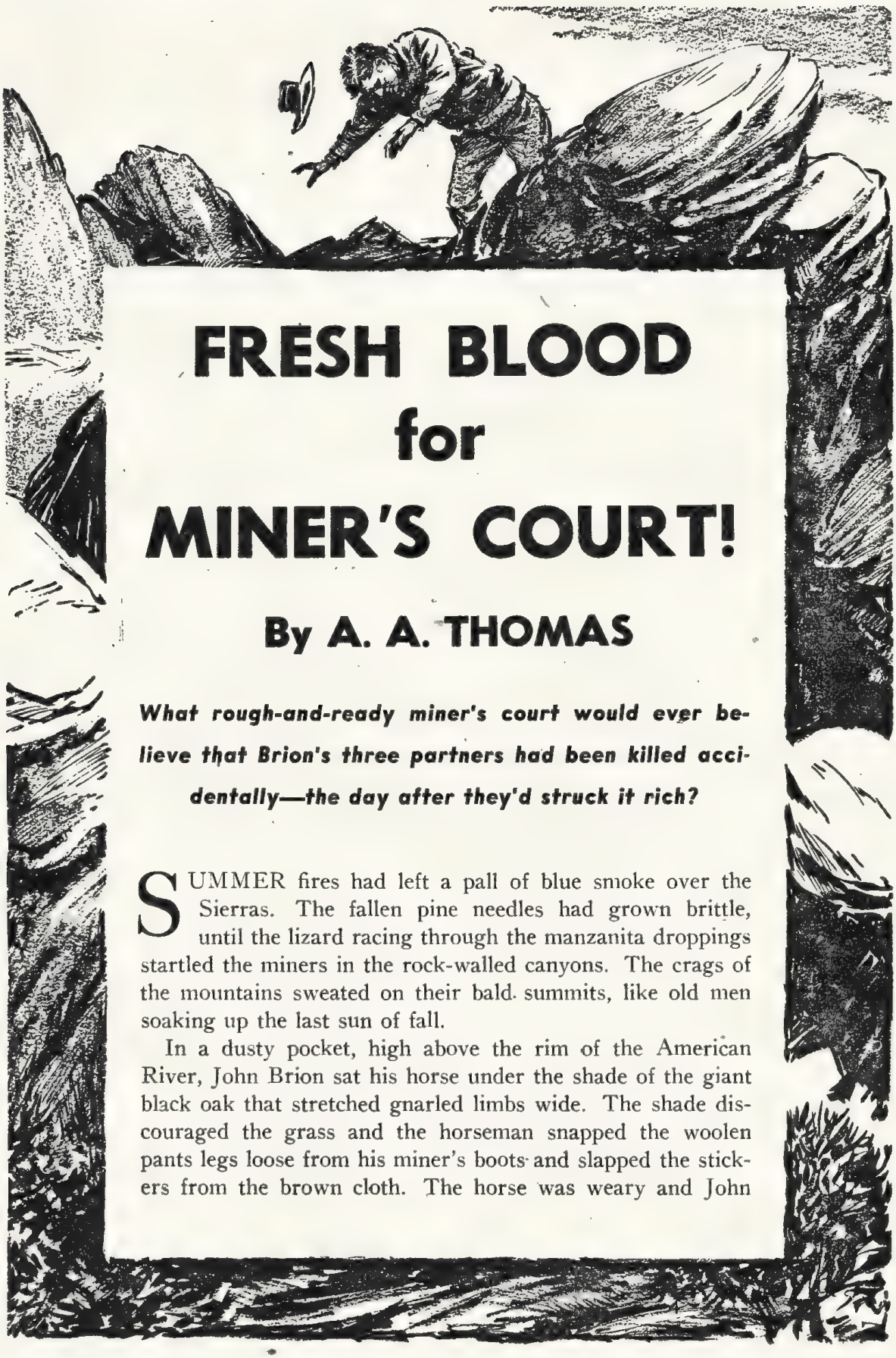
Brion fired from the waist . . . the dead body lost momentum and crashed head on.



FRESH BLOOD for MINER'S COURT!

By A. A. THOMAS

What rough-and-ready miner's court would ever believe that Brion's three partners had been killed accidentally—the day after they'd struck it rich?

SUMMER fires had left a pall of blue smoke over the Sierras. The fallen pine needles had grown brittle, until the lizard racing through the manzanita droppings startled the miners in the rock-walled canyons. The crags of the mountains sweated on their bald summits, like old men soaking up the last sun of fall.

In a dusty pocket, high above the rim of the American River, John Brion sat his horse under the shade of the giant black oak that stretched gnarled limbs wide. The shade discouraged the grass and the horseman snapped the woolen pants legs loose from his miner's boots and slapped the stickers from the brown cloth. The horse was weary and John

eased his bulk to the dry ground. He hooked his reins, and those of Con Vanard's horse, over his arm and hunkered down, miner fashion, against the scaley black bole of the tree.

He removed his wide-brimmed, flat-topped hat. His ruddy hair grew long. Irritated, he brushed it roughly back over his ears. A pale streak reached from his hair roots halfway to his eyes.

Somewhere behind those rocks, Con Vanard was treading a silent, encircling, approach. Brion could visualize the meat hunter slipping, Indian fashion, through the wild hay; laying a moccasined foot sideways against the roots of the tall yellow weeds, while holding a sun-stained hand against the betraying movement of the waist-high grass. Con could walk up on a fork-horn and slap it on the rump. If the sluice robbers were holed up in the pinnacles, Con Vanard would tap them on the shoulder before they knew he was present.

"There's maybe three horsemen in them rocks." At the words, Brion jumped to his feet, then grinned sheepishly at the speaker.

"Will you stop forever sneaking up on a man? There I was, peacefully thinking of you behind that pile of stone, like the Castle McGreagor that was torn apart by Queen Anne's men and—"

"S'trouble with Englishmen," Con Vanard hitched his powder horn away from his chest and scratched at the yellow hairs peeking through his shirt. He pointed a thumb. "It's a frontal approach that's your undoing. It's gettin' dressed up in bright red clothes, blowin' bugles, bangin' the drums and marchin' up the hill—in broad daylight."

"Tis *not* an Englishman that I am." John Brion rose angrily. "When a man comes out of the Highlands and travels across the world to a wilderness of heat-seared rocks, he may be tabbed a fool, but not an Englishman."

Con Vanard let a flicker of a smile crease the wrinkles of his thin, long-jawed face. "All right, Scotty. There's three horsemen in them rocks. May be the the placer thieves we been trailin' for these three days. Are you goin' to spend the afternoon defendin' your folks, or are we goin' in them rocks and see?"

"Ride right into those rocks—in broad daylight?"

"Sure enough, Scotty. That sun is layin' at our backs. You could stare out this way and all you'd see would be a red ball of sun. But, it's *you* that'll be ridin' in. Right into an ambush, just like the redcoats, if they should be bushwhackers. I'll head around to the north. When that sun drops below that snag tree stickin' up on Growler Point, we'll move in; you from the east and me from the north."

Con frowned and voiced his disapproval of John Brion's other partners. "Of course, if the Harley brothers had come along, the odds would be with us. The claim could of been left safe with Davy. But them fellas is kind of odd, to my way of thinkin'. Once we get out of this deal, and hustle down them thieves, I'm clearin' out. When fellas dig for gold together, they should fight together when that gold's lifted by placer thieves. Anyway, seems so to me."

IT HAD seemed so to John Brion, also. The excuse that there were only two horses was thin. Chana, downriver, had twenty horses, and Davy, their young nephew could have held down guard on the remaining sluice run-off.

Brion shrugged off his resentment and watched the lithe trapper hoist his body into the saddle of the paint horse and run the horse into the hip-high grass. Dolefully, his mind reviewed the events that led up to his present situation.

The placer mine had been rich. They had all worked hard, shoveling away the rocky top dirt to reach into the sand and gravel that held the gold. With patience, they had hauled the rich gravel a full quarter mile to the sluice that was wedged into

the rocks over which trickled water that stagnated in the ravine. Four Englishmen, from Dover, one Scot from the Highlands, and one trapper, Con Vanard.

Con had sneered at the work. "The danged mules got it better'n you. But you get rich. Just pay me wages for keepin' the meat comin' in." And he would disappear into the Sierras. But he kept the camp in meat and his tricks of survival kept peace among the partners. His habit of calling the English, Scotch, and the Scot a bloody Limey, brought a half smile to Brion's broad lips.

The water had been dammed off. The gravel bed was half cleaned out. Then the water was hustled down the sluice. The second day of sluicing had caught them at nightfall. Foolishly, they had left the clean-up for the following day.

Morning found the sluice box torn apart, the tracks of three horses led out of the canyon. It had been just that simple. An entire summer's work ripped out of the sluice in a few hours and the partners with only two horses between them. Con and Brion were elected to follow. Now, the pay-off was coming up. Somewhere ahead in those pinnacles, looming like giant tombstones on the flat valley, were three placer robbers.

Brion moved out into the sun and directed his horse straight for the cut. His eye caught the snag on the mountain and it glared until red streaks almost blinded him. He urged on his roan with a dig in the ribs.

It was quiet in the rocks. A trickle of water from some hidden seeping spring. The skittering race of a rock lizard. The mushy crunch of his horse's clobbing steps. Brion, with a suddenly sweating hand, slid the Henry repeater out of the rough bear-skin scabbard and turned in the saddle to stare at the sun reddened snag. A boulder crashed down a granite peak, and Brion whirled.

A head appeared, and he raised his rifle. A quick movement from his right notified him that he was in a crossfire. Swiftly, he fired at the man on the peak—and hit him. Then, desperately, he chucked another shell into the hot chamber and blazed at his second ambusher. With gritting teeth he watched the second man fall. He hoisted a leg over the saddle. Somewhere, there was one more in the rocks.

Brion was in a hot fury of impatience. He had cut the odds, but it would be a pity now to be blasted into eternity by the third skulker. The heat from the rocks wet his skin and his rough shirt gripped him under the arms and across the shoulders. He turned and stared again at the snag on the mountain and prayed that Con Vanard would storm into view. An intense feeling of aloneness shook him. Somewhere near, though, a man with a gun was probably slipping noiselessly among the rocks, preparing to blow the life from his sweating body.

The seconds crept by like sand dripping out of a glass bottle. Suddenly, the third man, his red shirt glaring against the blue granite, raced across a high rock preparing to leap. Brion fired from the waist. The legs became rigid in mid air and the dead body lost momentum and crashed head on, the chest striking a sharp horn of rock. Slowly, it slipped to Brion's feet.

Horror swept Brion's set face as he stared at the body and saw the sand trickling down the rock face and running across the sharp features of his victim. Brion felt an urgent need to stop the sand, a desire to run; to crash out of these boulders, to get out in the open where death wouldn't seem so raw and final.

The urge swelled his body, but his paralyzed legs remained like stumps and his eyes stayed fixed on the dead face. It was Jeb Harley. Those other two bodies in the rocks would be the brothers of Jeb Harley. How, on God's green earth, had they left the claim, circled Con Vanard, and reached this spot to be killed by their partner? He had left them three days back.

"Got all three. Nice shootin', Scotty." Con stood high on the rock and stared down on the stricken killer. Wordlessly, Brion raised blank eyes toward the trapper then, with rage sweeping through him, he threw down the Henry rifle, sank to the ground beside Jeb and buried his big head in his arms. Con scrambled down the granite. Wonderingly, he rolled the body over.

"It's Jeb. . . ." Regret made his voice harsh. "And those other two? God help us, John! It's our partners been killed."

THE blue faded out of the mountains. The long grass of the valley wept under a night wind. A campfire crawled yellowly up the rock and threw off broken flames that puffed into smoke. Brion held a burnt stick in a listless hand. He only half listened to the angry words of Con Vanard.

"It *wasn't* your blame!" Con motioned a hand toward the dark hollow where the bodies of the brother lay silent. "It was from lookin' into that sun. You turned, and remember, we was expectin' to meet up with placer thieves who'd kill before they'd be taken. What'd you think was expected? Was you to ask them who they was? They maybe didn't know we was this close. They maybe thought *we* was the thieves and drew down on you. Ah, hell, boy, get your chin outa your belly. They're dead now."

John Brion looked up and nodded. "I still don't see how it could happen. Where'd they get the horses? How'd they get around us?"

"Don't know, boy. After we hit out on the trail they musta changed their minds about helpin' us hunt them sluice-robbin' varmints. Whilst we circled to the south, they musta cut trail straight across the ridge. They was expectin' trouble and holed up in the rocks. What gets me, is how you done so much shootin' 'fore I come up from the north." He sighed. "But, they're dead now. It's for us to bury them and get back to the claim so's we can explain it all to young Davy."

Brion shook his head. Resolve darted across his face, leaving it hard and frozen with his sudden determination. "It's for us to take these bodies into Wood's Bar, and turn this in. Give somebody all the facts as to what I've done."

"Legal-like you mean." Con's snort startled the horses. "It's nobody in this world'll believe we shot our partners by mistake. At least, no court will. It'll be a miner's judgment you'll get, and they can be mighty mean and quick with a hang-rope. . . .

He rose and started to pace vigorously across the small space. His shadow wrinkled the half lighted rocks. His voice became soft. "It's best that they're buried here—and forgotten."

"No! It's best that we take the bodies in—and we should start now." Behind them, the rocks laying on the plain grinned like some half-buried skull emerging from a forgotten graveyard. John Brion began to shake nervously. Con Vanard looked at him, then stepped out of the firelight and brought in the victims' horses. The stiffened bodies lay in mute accusation. The hanging heads shook slowly with the clop of the horses as they were led out of the rocks.

On the ridge, Brion looked back. Shadows deepened in the crevices, forming the eye sockets of the skull. Brion had the feeling that the skull was pushing up out of the earth ready to spit out dirt and send a derisive chuckle screaming against his back. Through the long night, as the tired horses plodded toward Wood's Bar, Brion caught himself looking back.

Morning found the two men, with their dead partners, resting the horses on the high bank above Wood's Bar. Con's buckskin pants were stiff from the knees down. Dew had gathered heavily on the hip-high manzanita that rimmed the settlement. Absently, he rubbed life back into his cold hands.

It's a strange country. Hot as bejabers

in the noontime and cold as a sloppy pickle at night. "Now—" his voice was firm with authority—"I'm goin' in first. You'll stay with the horses and . . . them. I'll tell you when to come in. I've got some friends down there. It's best that I find them with this story of ours, first." Brion began to interrupt, but Con raised his hand and went on talking.

"I know what your ideas are. But it won't be at all safe to go bargin' into a nest of miners with the bodies of three other miners, with a story that they was killed by *rifle* bullets—all by accident. If I was settin' down there, just gettin' up from breakfast, and a couple fellas rode in with three dead men and says to me, 'We killed them by mistake 'cause somebody robbed out our sluice. . . .' " Con paused, but Brion continued to sit with his face bleak. "Well, lad, I'd put me two and two together and say right back, 'Mighty fishy. Them boys struck it rich on that claim and the three was killed 'cause of the strike. This is a fishy story to clear the murderer.' "

Without another word, or a pause for Brion to answer, Con handed the stiffened leather lead rein to Brion and urged his horse over the rim toward town.

CHAPTER 2 Hemp Law!

Like a fly drawn into a web, Con rode through the silent, upper end of the tent-lined street until he reached the frame and log buildings of the saloon and store part of Wood's Bar. A milling group of miners passed around a bottle on the pole walk in front of Dobleman's Store. They were half angry with the rough railery of men denied a full view of important proceedings.

"There's old Con Vanard!" A heavy arm reached toward the horseman and, with a harsh handshake and backslappings, Con found himself surrounded by the loud talking spectators.

"They'll let *you* in, Con. It's a miner's trial of justice. Couple of thievin' coyotes been caught redhanded. Stealin' food from 'nother miner on the Longmile Ravine. Jury's bein' chose now."

With hot hope in his body, Con Vanard worked his way through the crowd and entered a wide room. It was packed with standing miners. The low celing caught the tobacco smoke and the shouted names of men being called for jurors. The words belted the ceiling boards and echoed.

"There's old Con, the civvy-cat from the hills!" It was boomed out from the presiding judge, a huge solid man who smiled broadly at the small mountain man. His opened mouth showed that half his teeth were gone, as though hacked out with a hatchet. "He'll be juror captain." With chill, Con tried to shrink back into the crowd, but was shoved ahead until he was reluctantly seated in a roped off section holding some twenty-five men.

"Bring in the accused." The broken-toothed judge shouted. He slapped the card table with a thump of his beer glass and threw a satisfied leer at Con. "You, Kindred, it was your stuff that was stole and found in these fella's cabins. Sit up here in front." Kindred shuffled forward and stood by the judge's shoulder. His face was red with whiskey and importance.

A stir of clumping boots from the loft, and two men were hustled down open stairs and seated in front of the jurors but away from the reach of the spectators.

"Blessing has been appointed attorney for the thieves." The judge again banged his beer glass and shouted. "Let this trial become started. You state your case first, Kindred—that way we'll have the facts."

"Well," Kindred began, "I left my cabin. Been packin' in food for the winter. Beans an' such come high. Eleven pounds of sugar block cost better'n eight dollars. Seventy-seven pounds of pork hit me sixty-one sixty, not to mention the trouble of packin' it all fourteen miles from here—"

He was interrupted by a raucous voice from the tight-packed spectators. "Hey, maybe we oughta be tryin' the storekeep!"

"The storekeep is robbin' us legal," shouted the judge. He waited for the shouts of laughter to subside. "These criminals done it illegal. Get on with it, Kindred, but remember we all got the same problems, so stick to the robbery."

Kindred continued, pointing to a square of hard sugar resting on the judge's table. "That was mine, 'cause I broke it and I still got one half an' it fits the half that was found in them fellas' tent. The miners on Mile-Long Ravine was there when I busted into Bracy's tent an' found the other half piece of the sugar."

Like an actor, Kindred stepped over to the bar and came back with a broken block of gray sugar and, holding his hands high, brought the two pieces together. They matched in a snug fit. The men in the room shouted, then stilled when the judge slapped the table.

"Got a lawyer appointed for the defense," he reminded. "Mr. Blessing, see what you got to offer."

"I take exception to this rule of Mobocracy!" Blessing's thin voice slit through the men like a knife ripping canvas. His yellow merino coat jumped as he flailed the air viciously. "This entire proceeding is illegal—made so by the election of a government body at Monterey. I demand that these terrified citizens be turned over to an elected sheriff, and that they be given the protection of a lawful body elected by citizens. You are even now knocking vigorously on the doors of Washington, demanding admittance as the thirty-ninth state of a great democracy. But, it is just such irresponsible *pre*-judgment tactics, by unqualified groups of men, that will deny us admittance to the Union. I say—"

A rumble gathered momentum behind his back. His shouting words were drowned out by the angry, half-drunken shouts from the men pressing forward.

KINDRED shouted, and the judge punctuated his words with the banging of the beer glass. "It wasn't your beans an' sugar that was stole!"

Kindred grabbed Blessing and threw him to the floor. Blessing clawed free and rushed up the stairs. Kindred caught him at the top and the stamping of feet brought dust seeping down on the men below. Blessing's cries for help brought the men rushing up the stairway. The glint of a knife blade, the slash of glass, from a man who had reached behind the bar and knocked the bottom from a whiskey bottle before he went up, brought another scream from Blessing.

The loft shook with the weight and a timber cracked like a revolver shot. The trampling men suddenly stopped, realizing the floor would crush them all. Blessing's moans could be heard as the men returned to court.

"Blessing's jest upset," the judge announced calmly. Kindred smiled and rubbed his swelling knuckles. "Jurors, are you ready to give your verdict?"

Con Vanard rose to his feet. The excited group quieted. They knew this man. He had been with Frèmont and was in California long before the glitter of gold brought most of them across the plains.

"These men is maybe guilty as hell, Judge." Con's words brought a pleased purr from Kindred. "But, that fella Blessing ain't been treated fair. He's upstairs bleedin', 'cause he spoke his piece the way he seen it. I believe in that man and what he says. It don't always look on the surface the way a thing really is." He ran a scornful eye over the crowd. "If it takes a gallon of whiskey to get worked up, to do somethin' wrong, then you men done it. This fella, Kindred, lost some food and, I guess, those fellas stole it and, if this jury finds them guilty, then you'll hang them. That'll make you feel it was legal."

Con listened to the swelling rumble of fury and shouted over the noise. "You're

runnin' in a mob. A drunken mob. If it was man-to-man, and you was alone, you'd run just as hard—but the other way. I'm not sittin' on no jury here!"

Con tucked up his buckskin shirt until the weathered handle of his broad-bladed Boone was in plain sight and stalked slowly from the room. He stood resolutely on the pole walk for a full minute. From the depths of the saloon, he heard a voice vote of the jury in a shout: "Them two is guilty as hell!"

Con Vanard leaned a hand against the porch pole and heard the sentence of the court, yelled over the bubbling excitement of the crowd. "Seventy-five lashes to be administered by the injured party, Prosecutor Kindred!" The meat hunter mounted his horse as the shouting spectators hustled the victims out into the street.

He rode toward the rim bank, wondering what to do with a stubborn Scot and three dead bodies. To bring them into this blood-heated mob would mean certain death. It might be better to persuade Brion to hurry on toward. . . . Con's thoughts were shattered, and his face twisted ito fearful concern, as he saw Brion—slowly leading the three horses holding the Harley brothers bodies—coming down the dusty street.

Con had been in many scrapes. His life had hung on the thread of a broken web in the Indian country, and in frontier gun fights, but now, the thread was fast unraveling.

Behind him, he could hear the victorious shouts of the mob and knew they would soon push forward and press Brion in a vise of questions.

Slowly, with straight back and impassive face, Con Vanard advanced toward John Brion. His horse's hoofs struck a vagrant river rock and the white pebble skittered off, leaving a smooth rolling mark in the red dust.

Brion eased his lead horse to a halt as Con approached. He was puzzled by the set face of his friend. He stared past him at the crowd holding two men by ropes. As Con Vanard advanced, Brion half raised a hand. Amazed, he saw the pinto carry his frozen faced rider past him, and he caught one word: "Stall!"

The pinto was kicked into a trot and Brion turned to face the wrought up citizens of Wood's Bar.

Brion knew that he should get the first words out. Somehow, he must explain the dead bodies that rocked slowly on the horses. But Brion felt his mouth go dry at Con's strange desertion, and his own somewhat dubious decision to enter against Con's orders. The strangely silent, yet menacing postures of the crowd. He could find no beginning for an explanation and his heart sank as words suddenly hurled themselves from the mob.

"Killin' 'em wholesale now, eh?"

It broke the dam of silence. Angry shouts tore the stunned man forward as Brion was yanked from his horse. The Harleys' bodies were humped loose, like deer carcasses, and carried to the shade of the weed-choked alley that ran down the length of the street in back of the saloon.

"Hold on here!" Brion caught his breath as Kindred rasped out the words. "We got us a floggin' to handle fust."

"Kindred's right," the judge's words were slurred. "Whippin' comes first. Then, we'll re-convene and see what killin's been done. Johnson, you and Best'll remain and keep the prisoner in custody 'til the sentence of this court on Bracy and his pardner is fulfilled." He still clutched the beer glass and aimed it at the scaffold of a half constructed building. "Lash 'em to that beam there an' step back so's Kindred can get to work."

BRACY was hoisted by his bound arms until his toes stretched to maintain his balance. His red shirt was stripped down and hung over his legs. The muscular shoulders were tensed against the whip, and his tousled black hair was lank with sweat.

A blood vein throbbed through a bald spot. He let out a yell when he heard the whip swish. His shouts for mercy, interrupted by the drunken curses of the whipper, tore through Brion's stomach. He watched the welts raise on Brace's back and the blood seeped to the surface.

Kindred attacked with such fury, that he was soon panting and his arms seemed to stiffen with the effort of continuing the strong lash of the wet leather. The crowd shouted out the numbers of the blows and, at seventy-five, Bracy was cut down and hauled out of Brion's view.

His pardner was small, with flesh of chalk. A husky man in a stained butcher's apron snatched the whip from Kindred and, after a deep pull on a bottle, lay the whip against the screaming victim. Before the chant of thirty had been reached, the man slumped against the thongs and twisted loosely with the blows. The mouthings of the crowd grew louder.

A thin man suddenly leaped forward and tore the leather from the butcher. "This man's dead! Do you want to lash a dead man? Aren't you satisfied? Heaven above, have you no mercy?"

Kindred and a dozen others were on him immediately, holding him. They cut down the victim and Kindred, his words mingled with spittle, yelled drunkenly. "What say we give Bayliss, here, the rest of his lashes? He defends their stealin'. He's as—"

The butcher, pale, now, as he stared down on the huddled body of the whipped man, snatched the lash from Kindred and snapped its handle over his aproned knee.

The judge, from his sidewalk viewpoint, arms wound around the porch pole, shouted until his red gums showed. "The sentence has been done. Baylish is . . . I said, turn Bayliss loose. Let's get back to work and see about this fella!"

He let go of the pole to point at Brion, and fell heavily onto the walk. The dust rose as he weakly clawed his way upright and continued. "Court's adjourned . . . just 'till tonight. Take that body out an' bury it in some swamp where the diggin's easy."

Brion sat in a corner of the dark loft of Dobleman's. Johnson and Best passed a bottle between them stoically. John Brion waited. Thoughts chased through his brain like racing dogs and gave him no peace. He had killed his pardners, in a heat of fear that rose on a wave of self-preservation. Now, he was to be tried for the killing in an inferno of liquor-roused passion that followed the lashing of men, by a court of miners led by a drunken judge. It would not be the clean sword of justice that the court would uphold, but the blood-flecked whip of drunken insanity.

Somewhere, Con Vanard sat his pinto horse. Brion tried to picture the mountain man racig through the brush bent on rescue. But the picture would not take hold or become complete. His thought was disrupted by the shouts and riotous laughter of the crowd on the floor below. The clink of bottles and the raw cloying smell reached into the loft during the long afternoon. The steady clumping of boots told Brion that the men were visiting the bodies, stacked stiffly in the alley way. Turning them over to show the bullet wounds and hoarsely discusing the foul deed. Discussing too, the bland effrontery of expecting them to believe it was self-defense.

Night fell, and every passing moment of the setting sun was an eternity to Brion. When he was finally hauled roughly down the open stairs, rushed the crowd and seated on the floor in the middle of the standing men, he was glad that the waiting was over.

CHAPTER 3 Night of Terror

The judge's eyes were flicked with red. His words were vicious and the base of his tongue seemed swollen. "This is the jury," he directed Brion's attention to-

ward a large panel, seated in chairs. "Say your piece to them."

Awkwardly, Brion rose to his feet. "I should have someone to defend me. It is not fair that—"

"Them dead partners of yours don't think it's fair, either," the voice of Kindred interrupted. "I knew all three of them Harleys and their nephew, Davy. Where's *his* body, you murderin' whelp?"

"Hold on, Kindred." The judge was upset by Kindred's usurping of his authority. "The man's right. Anybody here want to defend him. His mouth held a wry smile as he looked over the crowd. The men shuffled, then turned to stare as Blessing stepped forward.

"I'll accept his defense." His face was bruised but the words were firm. "This is a rank mockery, but a dying man has the God-given right to have some other human standing by his side. However futile it may be."

Kindred's face was black but he tucked his arms together across his chest and remained silent.

"Tell your story, Brion. Heaven knows it is a poor way to defend a man but . . ." He shrugged and moved close to Brion. His hands were clenched in the pockets of his cloth coat.

John Brion took a deep breath, gazed around at the set faces, and knew his doom was sealed. The verdict of guilty had been set during the long afternoon. It had only been the judge's inability to hold to his feet that gave him the respite of the day.

As he stood rigidly, he felt the leather thongs, holding his hands, slit by a knife that nicked the ball of his thumb. He realized that a derringer was in his numb hand and heard a whisper. "Back toward the door, fast!" He felt the smooth cloth of Blessing's coat as it slid swiftly against his back. John Brion brought the ugly little muzzle waist high and pointed it straight at the gaping judge.

"We're going out." Blessing's voice carried the threat of death. "Get away from the doorway." Brion felt the thin man's body move away from his back and he edged a foot backward until he felt the man's slow moving pressure once again.

Slowly, back to back, guns pointed, Blessing and Brion moved toward the door. Frantic footsteps told Brion that a path was opening. Silence was a weight in the room. Then Blessing stumbled and started to fall.

Brion turned and fired his gun. He yanked Blessing to his feet. The escape avenue, to the doorway, was blocked by the scrambling men trying to escape. He hurried Blessing around and they rushed up the stairs. Blessing fired into the crowd that tried to surge into the loft, then slammed the drop door against the heads half-raised into the loft. In the darkness, Brion threw his prone body against the closed door as Blessing hurriedly slammed home a beam that easily withstood the pounding of the men on the crowded stairs. Blessing fired another cooling shot into the wood and the two men listened to the frightened shouts as the attackers scrambled off the stairs.

"We're in a pickle now," Blessing whispered. "They'll burn us out."

"You make your own troubles," snapped Brion. "And, why are we whispering? They'll kill you now because you helped me. Are you a fool?"

Blessing was busy lighting a candle in a greasy bottle. He looked over the flame. "And just why would you bring three bodies into this crazy town?"

John Brion smiled, and shrugged. "Guess it's because I'd of done it at home. Con Vanard warned me of the danger, but I had to be bull-headed and—"

"Is Con Vanard with you—I mean of your party?" Blessing's voice was hopeful.

"That he was, and now he's making his craven way to safety."

"That's possible. It would be wise if he keeps going, but after I saw him insult the beggars of the court this day, I don't be-

lieve he's left you." Hastily, Blessing related the events of the morning court. When he had finished, the two captives were slightly hopeful as they settled down to wait out the night.

AN OUTBURST of sound echoed through the stout walls and black smoke began to seep through the cracks in the floor of the loft. The crackle of flames brought a loud cursing and the furious voice of Dobleman bellowed, "You'll not burn down my place! If you want those men, you'll have to damn' well wait and starve them out."

The roar of a shotgun ended his words and the sounds of a banging bucket brigade told the prisoners that Dobleman had enough friends available to save his establishment.

A ram began battering the barred door. The heavy thuds of the beam shook the building and the door raised a fearful inch. Blessing stacked everything movable in a far corner. Brion laid his weight against the shattering timbers and then joined his ally behind the barricade. Blessing counted the shells and they divided them. "One of us will fire at a time. These pepperbox derringers are fine at close range. This will give the other a chance to reload."

The muzzle of a shotgun poked through the crack and blasted a shot into the loft, tearing slivers from the wall. The battering went on, until the snap of the bar told the men below that the way was clear for a rush. It came.

The drunken attackers roiled into the darkness. Several went down under the explosions the little guns made in the close room. Those below pressed up the stairs and tramped the dead and wounded. Blessing was flung aside, and Brion, swinging the broken door bar, saw his friend snatched down the stairs amid the roars of the seething crowd.

Then Brion, drawn down, under a welter of grunting bodies, felt like he had hit the bottom of a whirlpool of fists and elbows and cobbled boots. He tasted the blood in his mouth and, as his senses left him, he had a feeling of motion. As if he were bound, face down, to a wheel which turned relentlessly across a boulder-strewn road. He felt that the next turn would dash his face against the boulder and the relentless weight would crush his bones.

"Kick out that barrel!" The words came through a fog that coiled through John Brion's wakening senses. He opened his eyes with difficulty. Blessing, bloodstreaked in the glare of torches, stood on a barrel next to his own. The thin man's arm was twisted and his shoulder drooped from the pain of a broken arm. Brion felt the hairs of a rough rope biting into his neck.

"You'll kick out *no* barrel." The voice seemed to float coolly over Brion's head. He tried to turn at the welcome sound. It was Con's voice and it flowed down from the skeleton of new timbers that held the rope. Brion felt a surge of savage pleasure in the frightened hush that settled over the mob.

Somehow, Con Vanard had found a rescue party. For a fleeting instant, John Brion hoped that the little trapper would open fire. He willed, straining every beaten nerve, that the judge or Kindred would make a threatening move that would give Con the chance to use his gun. Something that had to be done to make an example; to deter, forever, such bloodthirsty mob rule.

The brutish faces, a minute before avid, now turned yellow under the torch light. The voice from the darkness above carried across the silence. "Can you move your arms, John?" Brion nodded. "Then loosen the noose an' bring Blessing up here."

Stiffly, Brion began to obey. But Kindred, his face black with fury, rushed forward. A booming shot rang out. Kindred pitched sideways and the stunned crowd drew back as the man's life ebbed out into the dust.

WHILE Brion lifted Blessing down from the shaky barrel, he could hear Con's voice. "This man, John Brion, killed the right men . . . but not knowin'. Don't move! Not one of you murderin' whelps!" the voice commanded. "Don't move 'till I finish and, whilst we're waitin', look yonder toward the head of the street."

The crowd turned. Wood's Bar was aflame. The upper street tents erupted into a blaze that showed men, torches flaring, sowing fire to the base of the wooden buildings. The fire crackled and licked toward the scene of the watching men.

"We're burnin' you out," Con continued. The light from the fires reflected against his back. His legs were braced on two scantlings, high on the building. "Them men is from the river, they come to rescue John Brion. We been here an hour an' seen how you been goin' about things. Tomorrow, Wood's Bar'll be done with. As it should be. Brion's sluice was cleaned out by the Harley boys. They left the trail for me and him to follow. Then, when we lit out, they almost butchered their own nephew. He's right here. Tell them, Davy."

A shadow appeared alongside Con. A half-childish voice began. "After Con and Brion left the placer, Harleys got drunk and tried to kill me. They thought they had. Then they stole them three horses from Chana's field below us, and lit out to catch Con and John. They must of been waiting in them rocks for bushwhacking . . ." While the boy talked, the fire spread through Woods Bar. It ate into the dried, sun-beaten timbers of the buildings and worked its way down the street.

"The men on the river—" Con's shout was angry—"have had enough of the evil of Wood's Bar and its drunken judge. You'll all stay put 'til the town is done. I'm only a half-baked mountain trapper, but I know there has to be law . . . a real law. Once it's here—"

"This this great state will join in protecting man from man." It was the thin, joyous, voice of Blessing who interrupted. "California will become of age. No man need walk in fear of his neighbors. No more verdicts of fury."

"Amen." Con said. Gun lax under his elbow, he kept watchful eyes on the sheepish crowd. They all seemed suddenly sober.

Behind, the flames ate into the lumber of the saloons that would leave ashes on the red dust. • • •

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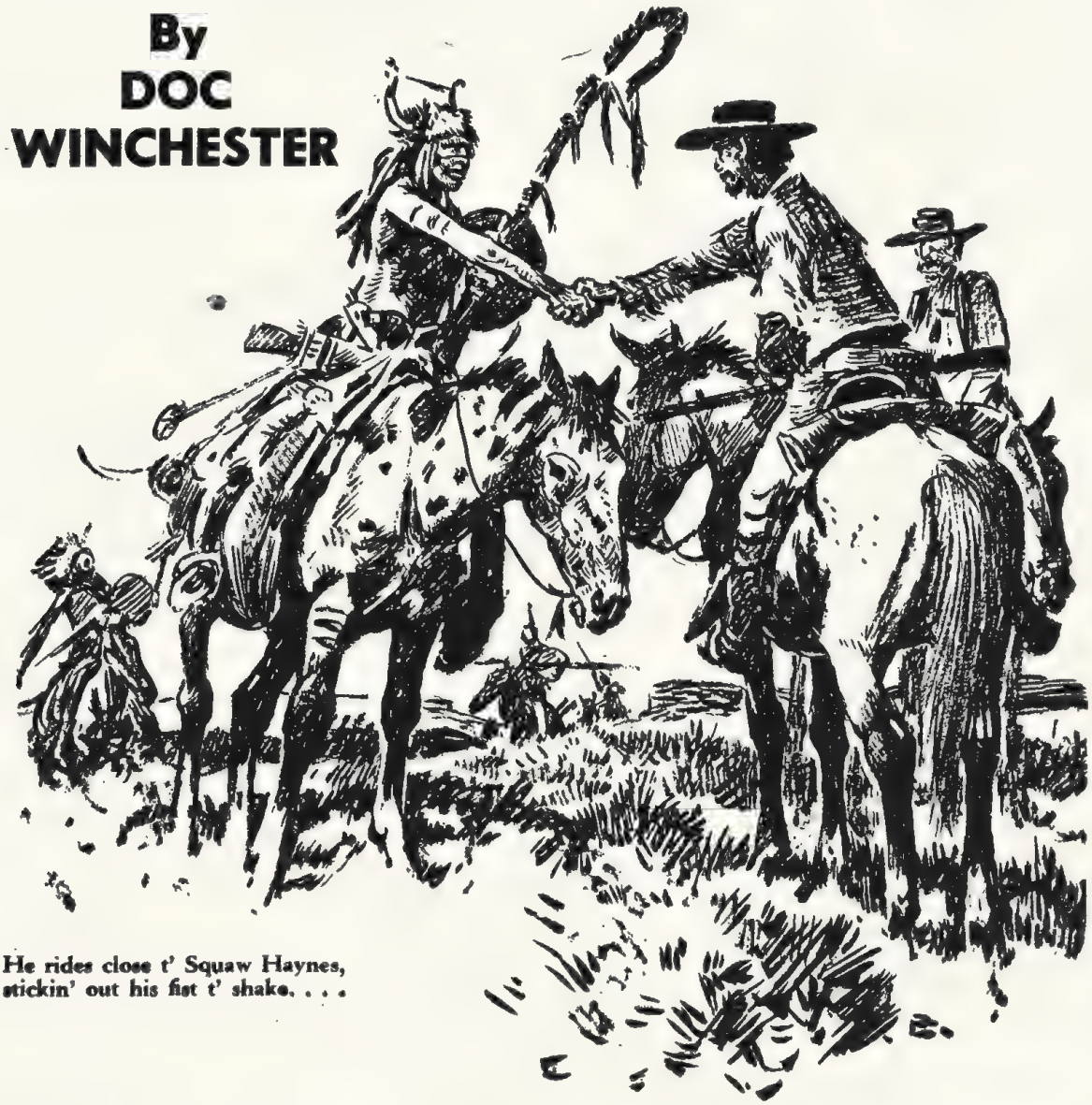


He rides close t' Squaw Haynes, stickin' out his fist t' shake. . . .

HAIR OF THE NIGHTHAWK

One bottle of snake oil, the nighthawk claimed, would permanently erase anything that ailed you: Baldness, belly-ache—or just plain living!

THE Damper M had just finished the fall roundup and was camped on Two Medicine Creek. Tomorrow they would start branding, cutting out beef for shipment, and throwing the cows and calves back on the Broken Bow. A range count of three thousand head, not counting calves, were between the rimrock ledges that formed the Two Medicine Basin.

It had been a hard summer and the punchers were ringy and fed up with each other's company. They had lost a lot of silver over a saddle blanket to the nighthawk, and the feeling they had among them-

selves went double for that gent. The nighthawk was a fancy dresser, and he would have led the fashion parade in any gatherment. There wasn't anything in the world prettier than his shadow on a sunny day. Being stuck on himself, in addition to being handy with a deck of cards, didn't hike his popularity any among the snuffy ranahans of the Damper M.

Riding up from a swing around the bedded herd, the nighthawk took his usual place at the fire. He figured on a couple of hours converse with the boys before they turned in for the night. The dark had just settled and the fire was cheerful in the lonesome land.

"It's sure funny the way things turn out," the nighthawk said. He removed his hat so the bald-headed jaspers could get a good look at his mop of thick, curly locks, "Yes sir, she's sure funny. Like that time me an' Squaw Haynes gets dispossessed o' our hair!"

THAT was back in '88 (the nighthawk said) an' we're camped about where we are now. Our herd is about built for fall branding except the coulees back o' Two Medicine. I was workin' fer the Damper M, same as now, only a feller by the name o' Coffin Zack is nighthawkin'. I'm ramroddin' the outfit, an' we're ridin' from daylight t' dark. Nothin' soft about it like you fellers has got. In the outfit there's me an' Squaw Haynes, Oscar Newman, Carrol and Henry Sorenson, Johnny Dalton, an' a feller that travels under the name o' Lee Carter.

Me an' Squaw Haynes gets separated from the rest of them an' finds ourselves in Injin country, about twenty miles from the wagon.

I ain't too worried, as Squaw Haynes savvies the Red Brothers, he havin' hooked up with a full-blooded woman, an' bein' about half Injin on his own hook. This squaw has him whip broke, an' he's smoking bark an' don't put up any holler about her cookin'. He's wearing moccasins, an' there's nothin' but a clout under his chaps. I asks him how come he's adorned with this Injin raiment, an' he lets out that he buys this woman o' his a dress from a catalog. It's a white female's attire and when she gets into it he can't tell which way she's going. He's anchored enough to this red grub spoiler that he sets the dress afire an' switches t' Injin gear so they'll look alike. They get along good enough and don't do any more fightin' than whites that's yoked up.

A little after noon we spots Injin smoke, an' there's some blanket talk takin' place along the top of the rimrock. The setup looks scary t' me, an' I'm all fer turnin' back. There's a lot of trails criss-crossin' the country, but they're grass grown which goes t' show that there ain't no hump-backed cows in the country. This spell these Injins ain't out after buffalo.

Squaw Haynes says these savages are plumb harmless, being Piegans, an' he's fer ridin' on.

About a mile farther he pulls up his horse an' gives a scared look at the scenery. I'm not overjoyed at the peaceful aspects of the country myself. Lookin' behind us, our hair crawls. Our back trail is cut off by about half a dozen braves, an' they is sure painted gaudy. Other bunches is closin' in on us from all sides. It look like our hole card is a deuce.

Then I makes another discovery that don't add t' my peace o' mind. These Injins is Blackfeet! There's a bounty on these citizens, but it don't look like we're goin' t' collect it. The place looks like hell with a new crop o' inhabitants movin' in.

I'm all for smokin' a path out. We'll be killed, but our foretop will be riding our skull. Squaw Haynes say there's a chance we can trade 'em some beef for an out, an' to hold my fire.

We're plenty circled, an' one red devil rides out o' bunch. He's ramroddin' the outfit an' forkin' a painted whittledig. He's sure puttin' in his time lookin' pretty. He's

like a brush fire with all that paint and feathers. His riggin' is down t' moccasins an' clout, an' there's a tommyhawk handle twisted in his hoggin' string. The sun bounces off him like he's a lookin' glass.

"We're gonna be short some hair, Slim," Squaw Haynes says, "unless we do some tall talkin'."

"Thought you'd smoked the pipe with these barbarians," I says.

"Not this bunch. My woman happens t' be Blackfoot, an' the way I gets her don't appeal t' these jaspers."

"How come?" I asks. "You traded a Henry rifle fer her, didn't you?"

"Yep," Squaw Haynes says. "The hell of it was I took twenty head o' horses t' boot while they wasn't lookin'. They been on my trail ever since."

"That," I says, "makes everything hunky-doodle."

I knows it up t' me t' save our bacon. I sizes up this gaudy buffalo eater, an' grabs a deck o' cards out o' my chaps pocket. I shows him some tricks. He don't get impressed, an' gives me a look that says he's thought o' some better ones.

I makes hand talk, askin' him who he is just t' stall fer time.

He signs "Blackfoot," an' lets his beady eyes drift t' Squaw Haynes. There's a grin on his face that ain't showin' in his peekers. He kicks his cayuse in the belly and rides close t' Squaw Haynes, stickin' out his fist t' shake. Squaw Haynes reaches fer his dew-claw an' swaps the grin right back at him. That was the last grin I saw on Squaw Hayne's face fer a long time.

It was sure a fancy trick this painted rattlesnake worked off. He hangs unto Squaw Hayne's fist, then lifts his horse to a jump. They both hit the ground at the same time, an' Mr. Injin is on top, fishin' fer his hand axe.

About ten feet from where Squaw Haynes an' this Blackfoot is piled up is a cactus bed. I'm in it. There's an Injin in the middle o' me an' he's got a handful o' my topknot. His hold is plumb good, as about six others has shown up, and has me by the front an' hind legs.

I NEVER been scalped but that once, gents, but it's a-plenty. Once'll do me. This savage that's workin' on me is plumb good at the business. He hangs unto my mane with one hand, an' chops with the other. He don't make any bungle o' the job. He hews a circle around my cocoanut, then he pries my scalp off with the point o' his axe blade. He takes his time about it, 'cause he ain't goin' anyplace. I never thought I'd enjoy partin' with my locks, but I comes pretty close t' shakin' hands with this hair lifter when he crawls off me.

While this Injin that operated on me stands there swingin' my head piece, I takes a gander at Squaw Haynes. Right now I wants t' give this squaw stealer an' horse thief credit fer bein' game. He was takin' his medicine like he liked it. These feathered brothers that's workin' on him must o' been with Red Cloud an' Sittin' Bull on the Little Big Horn, 'cause they act like old hands.

It's an' Injin's religion t' take anythin' his enemy can dish out an' ask 'em fer more. Squaw Haynes is tellin' these experts at torture t' go an get their squaws t' help 'em. He tells 'em they is greenhorns, an' mentions their ancestors in impolite terms. As he sees it, they is a bunch o' old women, an' ought t' be hauled back t' camp on a set of travois poles. He's sure playin' her Injin. They'd all ready lifted his hair, an' was peelin' off his bark in narrow strips fer hoggin strings.

Injins is human, same as you fellers, an' they don't get any big laugh out o' him belittlin' their work. They start gatherin' sagebrush for a fire. They figger a slow roast'll boil some o' the back talk out o' him.

This delay in the proceedin's saves his life. They don't much more than get the blaze goin', when there's a wild yell coming from our back tracks. It was a hide-chillin' whoop an' my hair would sure o' stood up

if I'd 've had any left after the scalpin'.

It was the rest o' the Damper M outfit. They gets lonesome fer our company an' starts trackin' us. They knowed we was headed fer Injin country, an' when they sees the smoke talk along the rim, they didn't lose any time foggin' it in our direction.

These Injins heap savvy it's time t' move. They kick up plenty o' dust, an' there's lead pingin' off the boulders as these Damper M waddies is on the warpath. Both Henry an' Carrol Sorenson are packin' Sharp's buffalo guns, an' both their barrels is red hot. Johnny Dalton is workin' the lever on an old Marlin .70 he stole from a sheepherder. Both Lee Carter and Oscar Newman are pumpin' long-barreled .44 sixshooters. These Damper M hands wasn't missin' a shot at these Blackfeet, but the Injins are travelin' so fast their lead don't more than dent their hides. Lee Carter has a jaw full o' Climax which he uses t' put out the fire, an' the fight is ours.

Both me an' Squaw Haynes look pretty comical with our scalps gone, but we're plenty joyful t' see these hombres. We piles back on our horses an' head for the wagon. My cayuse has his mane tore out from his ears back, which shows I put up a fight fer my hair.

The funny part o' the story comes after we spots a covered wagon that's movin' slow across the flats. It's hauled by a couple o' mules, an' headed north. We swing our course to warn this wagon against Injins. The jasper with this sorry-lookin' outfit turns out to be a hair doctor.

Painted on his rig is the news that he's Doc Benson, inventor of the famous *Elixir Hair Restorer*. This remedy'll cure any disease known to man or horse. On top o' that, it'll grow hair on a boulder.

Seein' the condition o' me an' Squaw Haynes' scalps, he lets down the table leaf on the back o' his wagon an' goes into his spiel.

It don't take him long t' sell us on the idee. This remedy is t' be took internally, the doc says, an' requires only a few minutes t' take hold. Me an' Squaw Haynes takes a big dose apiece, then walk around, waitin fer sign o' hair.

It don't take long. I takes a glance at Squaw Haynes, expectin' t' see his white scalp. Damned if it ain't disappeared. He's got hair six inches long. My eyes is buggin' out when I feels fer my own topknot. I got the prettiest head o' brown, curly hair you ever laid eyes on. It's just like you see it now. It don't come out wild, but she's combed and wavy an' sure does add t' my other good looks. The upshot was, me an' Squaw Haynes buys the doc out an' figgers on goin' into the hair trade.

ONE of the bald jaspers around the fire wanted to know, "You wouldn't be a damned liar by any chance would you Slim?"

"Nope," the nighthawk answered. "What'd be the object in tall-talin' you jaspers?"

"How about that time you killed a Cinnamon bear that measured over thirty feet from his nose back?" another puncher asked.

"That bear story, gents, is what broke me o' lyin. Fact is, I told it so many times I got t' believin' it myself. One day, just t' make sure, I climbs up in the feed loft where I'm supposed t' have the hide nailed up, an' damned if it wasn't there!"

"What happened t' all this hair grower?" This from a ranahan whose forehead reached to the back of his neck.

"The fact is," the nighthawk answered, "I brought along a case, hid out in the bottom of the bed wagon. I ain't tryin' t' sell anything t' you fellers, but—"

"Hell!" Whisky Simmons piped up, "I'll buy anything once."

"I'm callin' him, too!" Andy Devers spoke up. Andy was short hair on account of having tended bar three years with his hat on.

It didn't take long for the idea to spread.

The punchers began to angle towards the wagon where the nighthawk was prying off the lid of a wooden case.

"No chance o' this outfit going loco an' stampeding the herd is there, Slim?" the ramrod wanted to know.

"Their actions'll never tell they been using doc's goods," the nighthawk assured him. He tipped one of the bottles he had selected for himself to his mouth and took a long drink. His poker face didn't show anything, but tears ran from his eyes. "In fact," he went on, clearing his throat, there ain't a yell or a cuss word in a barrel of it. It renders a man gentle an' docile. Conversation will increase under its influence, but the talk will be low an' genteel. While it cures the diseases o' the human carcass, it also civilizes the mind, if any."

A week later, brand inspectors, range detectives and punchers from various outfits rode the Two Medicine range trying to find out what happened to the roundup, wagons, horses, and eight head of punchers belonging to the Damper M outfit. Where the wagon had stood was a barren waste. Sagebrush and cedar had been grubbed out for a mile up and down Two Medicine Creek. Every man that rode the location said it had all the earmarks of a whindig in the way of stampedes. A wheel belonging to the chuck wagon, was found over on the Little Proposure.

Later, word came that Damper M beef had been seen near Greybull in Wyoming, and the stock was still plowing south. A cow was seen at Deerfoot Montana wearing a dutch oven over one horn. All of the missing punchers were finally located in various parts of the country, working for different outfits. All but the nighthawk. A rumor got out that he had joined up with Butch Cassidy's Wild Bunch in Wyoming. This news backfired when it was heard that Butch himself had put up five hundred dollars reward for the jasper that starts this scandal against his outfit.

A year later, a sheepherder found a full bottle of what he took to be laughing water. It lay in the bend of the creek near where the Damper M had camped. He imbibed the contents in the hope of assuaging his loneliness. Not only was his spirits raised, but he found his joints free from stiffness, and there was a general alacrity of movement followed by a complete cure of that disease known as talking to himself.

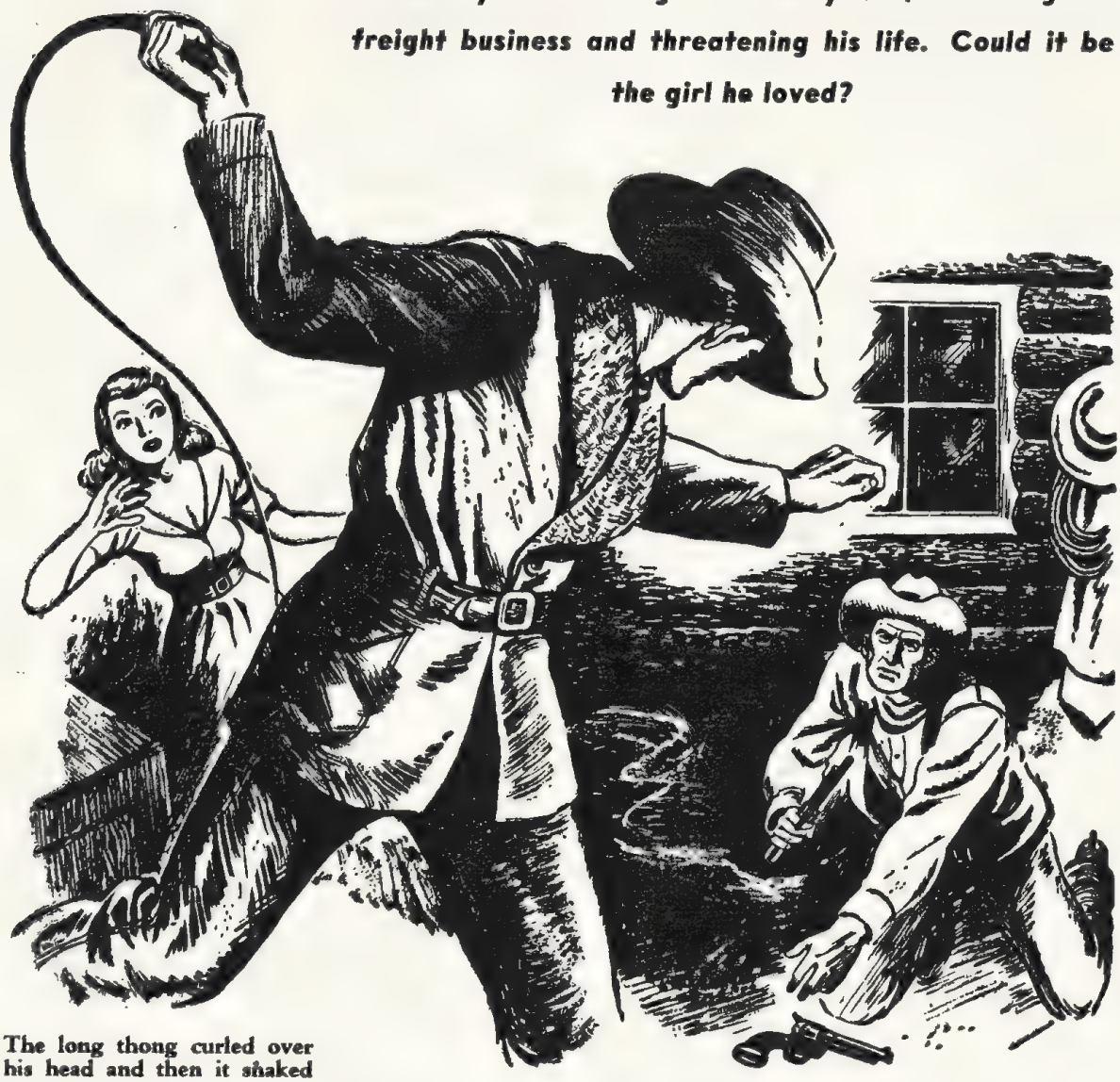
Which goes to show that the nighthawk's remedy might have something to offer, at that. • • •

WHILE the Westerner has the reputation of making one word do the work of two, he also has a sense of humor about the tradition he has built up about his silence. One story he gets a laugh out of is about a cowpoke who went to work for a man who prided himself on his silence.

The rancher called his new hand on the first morning and explained how things were with him. "I'm a man of few words," he said. "I don't like to talk when I don't have to. Now, whenever I want you, I'll whistle at you. Whenever you hear me whistle, don't bother to answer, just come a-running. Remember, I'm a man of few words, and when you hear me whistle, just don't answer, just come a-running."

The cowpoke grinned at him. "I'm glad to know we're so much alike," he said to his new boss. "I'm a man of few words myself. Don't like to talk at all. So, when I hear you whistle, and I shake my head like this, that means I ain't a-coming." *Al Echols*

Somebody was selling Lon Kelley out; wrecking his freight business and threatening his life. Could it be the girl he loved?



The long thong curled over his head and then it shaked out. . . .

By WILL COTTON

WHIP RECKONING

HE COULDN'T trust her, Lon Kelley thought as he slammed the door behind him and stepped into the office of Kelly and Carlson Transport. She was selling him out behind his back. He stamped his feet to remove the clinging snow. Jeanne Adaire looked up from the papers on her desk and her red lips broke into a smile. Why did he have to go for her, Lon asked himself? Why does a man fall in love with a girl who knifes him in the back? Walking over to the pot-bellied stove, Lon said:

"Where's that lummox of a pardner I got?"

Chaffing his hands over the stove, he watched Jeanne out of the corner of his eye. He felt the desire for her mounting in him,

as it always did. She was built just to make men excited, Lon thought. And she had brains. She could wrestle with papers and have them come out right. She also knew how to put Kelley and Carlson out of business.

"Jack went out about an hour ago," she answered in her rich, throaty voice that fired Lon's blood. "He was going to the railroad to check on the latest Randall shipment."

"And check on Lucille, too."

Jeanne laughed, a little nervous laugh that seemed forced to Lon.

"Could be," she answered lightly.

Lon went over to his desk and settled down in the chair behind it. He didn't use the desk much; only when it seemed necessary. Mostly, Jeanne could attend to all the details while he and Jack Carlson worked the freight back and forth between Banner and Red Dog.

That was what he was, a freighter, and he belonged in the open country, cracking the bullwhip as the mules pulled the freight wagons over the trail. Not behind papers growing a paunch like an executive. Still, a man had to think of getting ahead, especially when he was beginning to cut in some one like Jeanne on his future. Now he took up a pencil, held it a moment in both hands and then suddenly snapped it and tossed the broken ends down on the floor. He was angry with himself, knowing he ought to forget Jeanne because he couldn't trust her.

Little furrows began crinkling his weatherstained forehead and he glanced idly over at Jeanne who was now intent on her work. Her pen scratched over paper, but then, as if she realized she was being watched, she looked up and for a moment their eyes met. Lon thought he could see something behind her eyes, some depth of feeling that was meant only for him and an excitement stirred inside him. Her eyes dropped away.

"Randall sent a message down today that he needs the freight right away. There are some tools that are long overdue and if he doesn't get them soon it will slow down production at the mine."

Jeanne's voice had taken on an efficient businesslike tone.

"Figured that," Lon said. He hesitated a moment before he asked, "Randall's messenger say anything else?"

"Yes." Jeanne's voice went flat. "He said if the shipment doesn't get through, Randall will have to make a change."

"I figured that, too."

Lon knew that without the contract with Randall there wouldn't be any Kelley and Carlson Transport. There just wasn't enough other business. He didn't blame Randall much, either, for threatening to make other arrangements. Three times in the past month shipments had been hijacked. And always important freight. Once it was the mine payroll. It wasn't that the loads to Red Dog weren't insured, but the freight was stuff Randall needed and insurance payments couldn't make up for the great inconvenience Randall suffered because of the losses.

Finding another pencil, he began tapping it on his desk. A tenseness began stretching his nerves. He and Jack Carlson had worked hard to make a success of their freight business. But that wasn't as important to Lon as what it represented to him personally. Before he had settled down, he had been a drifter, aimless and unsatisfied, feeling always that he could amount to something if he ever had the chance. Now he did amount to something, but his self respect had been bought too recently to withstand the shock of failure. He was not sure he had the courage to start at the bottom again.

JACK CARLSON came in, his ugly, good-natured face glowing from the cold outside.

"Before you get warmed up, come out back in the shed with me," Lon said, dropping the pencil and scrambling to his feet.

"Sure," Jack answered, then as he caught the look in Lon's face he asked, "Anything wrong, chum?"

"Want to show you somethin'."

Jack looked from Lon over to Jeanne, then back at Lon again. Slowly Lon nodded.

In the shed Lon sat down on the edge of a packing case.

"We got to get this stuff started up to Red Dog tomorrow, sure," Lon told his partner.

Jack, leaning back lazily against a pile of boxes said:

"The goin's pretty rugged, pard. Can't we hold off?"

"Randall sent a messenger down. He needs these supplies. Also, if the stuff don't get through he's tearing up our contract."

Jack whistled.

"Well, that ain't good," he remarked. "But we could start up somewhere else if we have to. Lucille don't like it here much, anyway."

Lon took out a bag of tobacco and began to roll himself a smoke. His fingers were clumsy with the cold. He said quietly:

"This area's growin' fast, Jack. We got the contract to carry all the freight up to the mine at Red Dog and the mail franchise is opening up again next month and it's a cinch we could have it. If we play it right we can develop into a big business around these parts. And we've worked too hard not to keep on."

"If Halpern doesn't beat us to it."

Lon lit his cigarette. He said casually, "You sure of that about Jeanne and Halpern?"

"They were down at the hotel together, talking, the night before that payroll was lifted. How do you expect Halpern knows when any important shipment is goin' through?"

Lon said doggedly, trying to convince himself, "But we aren't sure Halpern's behind the raids."

"Who ain't sure?" Jack asked. He eyed Lon curiously. Then his features softened and he said, "I reckon I can understand, Lon. It's hard when you go for a girl to find out she ain't all you expect. But you get over it. We ought to let her go, right away."

Lon didn't say anything. A gust of wind rattled the boards of the roof and Jack began to stamp his feet.

"Let's go back where it's warm," he suggested.

"Wait a minute. We got to get that shipment through. That means one of us anyway has a gun-chore, and I figure if we play it smart we can make it. I'll move out in the morning with a train loaded with empty cases. But we'll spread the word around I'm freighting those tools Randall needs so bad. That should suck in Halpern and by the time he raids me it will be too late."

"Too late for what, pard?"

"For the train you're takin' through over the new trail. You can start later tomorrow, after the word is out I've taken off. I'll use the old trail and that will look like I'm tryin' to avoid trouble by taking the round about route."

"That'll be okay if it works. But you may land up in boothill."

Lon shrugged. "Not necessarily. I won't have anything to defend. But if I can, I want to nab whoever is behind it."

"You got to keep the plan quiet."

Lon realized Jack meant they mustn't let Jeanne know. He stared straight ahead, a hollowness spreading out inside him.

"We got to keep it quiet," he agreed tonelessly.

From behind the cases there came the sound of light footsteps and for a moment both men seemed to freeze. Then Jeanne rounded a crate and stopped when she saw them.

"Hope I didn't interrupt anything," she said.

"It weren't nothing," Jack replied. He shot a quick sharp glance at Lon.

"Mr. Halpern just dropped in," Jeanne

went on. "He says he's driving a load up to Red Dog tomorrow and if you've got anything rush he could take it up."

"Tell him no," Lon said.

He dropped his cigarette and crushed it out with his boot.

Jeanne left them. The two men waited a moment, looking at each other. After the door to the office slammed shut Jack said softly, "You think she heard, Lon?"

"No, she didn't hear."

He wondered why he said that. There was no way to be sure. And if she passed on the information to Halpern there would be no use going through with the plan he had sketched out. But he had to trust Jeanne. He stood up abruptly and started toward the office.

Jack caught up with him and laid a hand on his shoulder.

"There's one thing you ought to know," he said, his face flushing slightly. "I asked Lucille to marry me."

"Congratulations, feller," Lon said.

"It isn't set yet," Jack went on slowly. "She said she'd have to think it over. But it won't make any difference to us, Lon. I'll stick this out with you."

As if it didn't matter, Lon answered, "Thanks."

IN THE office, they found Halpern sprawled out in a chair near the pot-bellied stove. His coat was opened and he was smoking a cigar. At their entrance he made no move other than to flick some ashes onto the floor.

The freighter's thin face was expressionless, but Lon thought uncomfortably that the man was handsome in a rough, hard-bitten way and even in his casual relaxed posture, his raw powerful frame gave a sense of virile strength. A girl might well be attracted to a man like Halpern. Lon glanced at Jeanne, saw she was looking at him. Then his gaze shuttled back to Halpern.

"Didn't reckon you'd still be here," Lon said in a soft voice. "We ain't got nothin' to move up to Red Dog."

"I was warmin' up a mite," Halpern remarked. His eyes went over to Jeanne and roamed over her figure. Lon felt his skin begin to burn.

Then Halpern went on, his voice lower and more confidential, "Don't want you fellers to think I'm buttin' in on your affairs, but as I'm goin' up anyway I got thinkin' maybe I could run them tools up to Randall and save you the trouble."

Lon could feel his body tighten up. He noticed that Jack had drawn up his body until it was stiffly erect, but Lon pretended not to notice. He knew his pardner was wondering just as he did how Halpern had learned about the shipment that was in the shed waiting to be freighted up to the mine.

"We can take care of our own freight," Jack said sharply.

Halpern grinned.

"Was wonderin' about that too. You got a good contract with Randall, but there's been a lot of trouble in the hills lately. Seems to me, it wouldn't hurt to cut in another man. Someone who packs a good gun."

"Meanin' you?" Lon asked.

"Why not? With three of us we could control all the freight in the whole area. We could raise the rates, make a killing fast. As it is now, you fellers and me are jest playin' for peanuts."

"We're doin' all right."

Halpern grunted.

"Okay," he said, standing up, "jest remember I made the offer. You ought to know there's more ways than one to skin a cat."

Lon strode to the door. He pulled it open and a blast of wind whirled into the office, catching up papers from the desks and spinning them across the room.

"The way I heard it, Halpern, is that there's more than one way to skin a snake."

Halpern laughed and, buttoning up his coat, went outside. Lon slammed the door

behind him, then swung around to find Jeanne and Jack staring at him.

"Well, Halpern is out in the open now," Lon announced grimly. "I reckon, Jack, there ain't any use waitin' around. I'll push out tonight. You can start in the morning."

He heard Jeanne's little gasp and then she flung herself at him, her arms going about his neck pulling his face toward hers. A heady wine intoxicated Lon, and he pressed his lips hard against hers while he crushed her to him. But suddenly she broke away. Her fear showed in her bloodless cheeks as she asked, "Do you have to, Lon? Do you have to risk your life this way?"

He stood swaying there, still under the magic of her.

"I reckon so. I reckon there's no escaping this gun-chore."

He didn't realize until later that she must have known what the plans were. By that time, it was too late to worry.

THE freight train pulled out of town with the curses of the drivers mingling with the snapping whips and the crunch of hoofs in the snow. Lon, riding at the head of the train, squinted into the wind and wondered what lay ahead of him. He knew the word was being passed on to Halpern that he had set out. He glanced back at the string of rumbling wagon and plodding mules. No one but himself, Jack and perhaps Jeanne knew that this train was a decoy—bait to trap a bandit.

A half hour out of Banner the train swung off onto the old trail to Red Dog. Ahead loomed the ragged hills rising into the slate-gray sky. From the rear a rider approached at a gallop, slithered around the wagons, and drew abreast of Lon. Recognizing the slender figure on the steaming horse, Lon signaled the train to halt. He twisted, facing the rider, feeling the green eyes going over him, measuring him.

As the full red lips parted in a smile, Lon said, "Lucille, what are you ridin' out here for?"

Her eyes seemed to be holding back some secret amusement.

"I must get to Red Dog," she told him. "It's bad weather for traveling alone."

"Why pick a mule train for company? We don't move very fast."

She tossed her head, saying, "Oh, if you're worried about what Jack will think, don't be. He doesn't know I'm here. He won't ever know. Jack asked me to marry him. . . ."

"I know that."

"There's some business I must attend to in Red Dog, first."

Thinking about what lay ahead, Lon said, "This trip I haven't got time to be bothered by a woman, Lucille. You better go back to Banner."

A look of determination stamped her features.

"I'm riding through, anyway, Lon Kelley. If I bother you, I'll go on alone."

Lon shrugged. There was something about Lucille he never could understand; some hard core that never seemed to melt. He knew she meant what she said and it was no time to have a woman along.

"You could wait a couple of days."

"Jack's going up to Red Dog tomorrow. By the time he gets there my business will be over and we can find a preacher to marry us. Be nice to me, Lon, and let me come with you."

"But there could be trouble. . . ."

She pursed her lips into a little pout.

"Of course. There's always that chance," she answered. "But you'll look out for me. I'd feel safer with you than alone."

He thought, *She's just stubborn enough to get her way.* He didn't want the responsibility of a woman on his hands when the shooting started, but Lucille was his partner's fiancée, and it wasn't a very tough thing to do if it would help Jack out. Getting her to Red Dog would bring the marriage closer.

"Okay," Lon told her, but without enthusiasm. "You stick with me. But if a

raid comes somewhere along the route, you'll have to run for it because I won't be havin' time to worry about you then."

"Oh," she said, drawing in her breath. And then, as if it came to her as an afterthought, she went on, "But I don't think you'll run into any shooting trouble. I just know you won't."

Lon glanced at her sharply. Her green eyes were smiling at him innocently. Lon signaled for the train to resume its progress.

Almost immediately Lon regretted his weakness. But he had given in, and he would have to make the best of it. Lucille fell in behind him. It was slow, tortuous progress up the twisting trail. A wagon skidded, slithering half over a banking at the trail's edge. Men grunted and animals fought the slippery footing. Overhead, the sky blackened as night came on. It took two hours longer than Lon had figured to reach the deserted, sprawling buildings of the worked-out Norset Mines. The train pulled in there, to camp for a short night's rest.

In one of the weathered shacks, Lon built a fire for himself and Lucille. The building, dilapidated as it was, afforded some shelter from the bitter night, and as the flames flickered higher and the warmth crept slowly into Lon's stiff body, he found himself watching Lucille and envying Jack his approaching marriage. He knew it was only the moment; the comfort of the remote shack with the icy winds whistling outside and the presence of the lithe woman with the green eyes close by him. He loved Jeanne and there would never be anyone to take her place. Yet the hurt that came from not being able to trust Jeanne was deep and shameful in him so that he felt cut off from her and all the world outside.

He began to wonder when Halpern would strike. Lon had staked a guard out around the camp, but it would not be difficult to sneak by the guard, under cover of the darkness.

"You seem all keyed up," Lucille said, her voice not much more than a whisper.

She moved over to him, her body fluid and graceful, until she was so close it would be only necessary to reach out and grasp her in his arms.

He looked away, into the fire, saying, "Just thinkin', Lucille."

"Long thoughts. This business means a lot to you."

"I've worked hard. I wouldn't like to fail, now. I guess it does mean a lot, to me and Jack, too."

A momentary shadow crossed her features. Or perhaps, Lon thought, it was just the shadow from a flickering flame.

"You'll make Jack a good wife," Lon said slowly. "You seem sort of to fit into this life, although at first glance it doesn't seem like you would. That will mean a lot to him."

He saw her shoulders heave.

"You think Jack will want to stay on here? Indefinitely?"

"Sure. Why not?"

"Well, it's only that I hoped after a while we could go back East. I was brought up there, you know. But my father never could hold down any job very long and he thought the opportunity was always better somewhere else, so he came out West here to make his fortune. When he died, Ma and I had to stay on because there wasn't any money."

Her voice had risen and a far-away look had crept into her green eyes, making them flat and cool. Lon was suddenly afraid, although he could not explain why.

"But I thought—"

"It's a hard, brutal life," she went on, her voice rising. "I want comfort and fine things and friends who have some manners."

Her voice dropped away, leaving only the crackle of the fire to break the silence between them. Then, suddenly, her mood changed.

"I'm sorry," she said. "I was talking like a fool."

Abruptly she flung herself at Lon, her lips seeking his. Fighting back the desire to respond, Lon pushed her roughly aside. She sat in a heap on the floor as Lon scrambled to his feet.

"You'll be okay here," he said gruffly. "I'll see you get enough wood for the fire."

"Don't leave me," she cried at him. "Don't leave me alone."

"You'll be okay."

He went out, slamming the door of the shack behind him.

JUST before dawn broke, the train moved on. The wind had died down, but the air was brittle with cold and underfoot the snow was grainy and hard-frozen. Lucille rode well to the rear of the column. She had not spoken to Lon since the night before.

As the sun rose, a flat yellow disk coming up from behind the white-crusted hills, a feeling of urgency crept into Lon. With bleak eyes, he kept scanning the surrounding territory for signs of the attack he knew was coming. The way grew steeper and the mules toiled while the drivers shouted and threshed their arms against the cold. Lon ranged ahead, fell back and for a while took over the lead team, feeling the need to hold the reins in his hand and crack the long whip over his head.

Noon came and they halted for rest and food. There was still no sign of Halpern. Lon began to wonder if the rough going had caused the raider to postpone his showdown. Then, in the early afternoon, Lon rounded a curve and saw spread out below him in the cleft between the hills the box-like buildings of Red Dog, frosted with snow. Small black figures moved like ants along the main street and farther up in the canyon the works of the mine spread out, like a village of its own.

Defeat gnawed at Lon, tightening his guts and clamping his jaw tight. His plan hadn't worked. Halpern hadn't fallen for his ruse.

While the train pulled up closer, he watched the twists of smoke rising from the chimneys below and then he looked across to where the new trail between Banner and Red Dog worked out from the hills and cut into town. In a few hours Jack would be riding in over that trail.

And then Lon found the wind suddenly driven from his body, as if he had received a hard blow, and every tendon in him jerked tight. Jeanne had known that Jack would be freighting the supplies. If she got word to Halpern it would explain why he had met no trouble on the trip up the old trail. Halpern would strike where he could do damage. At Jack's wagon train.

Despite the cold, he could feel the sweat coming out of his forehead. He couldn't believe Jeanne was against him. But he'd know, sure enough, before long. Tensely, he ordered the lead driver to take the train into Red Dog. Then he kicked his horse forward, down the trail toward Red Dog. But he cut off, before reaching town, and headed along the new trail, driving his mount at a headlong pace that sent the snow flying away from its hoofs like fine white spray.

Lon reached the remains of Jack's wagon train a little before sundown. A few overturned wagons lay at the edge of the trail. One had been burned and still smouldered. Two men lay stiffly in the snow in grotesque positions. Mules, freight and the remaining wagons had been driven off.

Then Lon saw Jack. He sat propped up against a boulder, a patch of crusted brown blood spread out around him. His partner's eyes were glassy, but he was still breathing.

Jack tried to move as Lon reached him, but he only succeeded in slipping down into the snow. Lon lifted his head gently, cradling it as he said tightly, "Tough goin', pardner." Jack coughed. He asked for a smoke.

Lon built a cigarette, lit it, held it to Jack's lips. A numbness went over Lon as he wondered, momentarily, if a freight line,

the future—anything—was worth this. And then he thought of Jeanne. He felt his whole body heave and he thought he might be sick.

The smoke from the cigarette drifted out of Jack's sagging mouth. His pleasantly ugly face took on a peaceful look. He began to move his lips stiffly.

"Don't try to gab," Lon said. "Was Halpern with the men who raided you?"

Jack nodded. He was still trying to say something. Lon thought he heard the name Lucille. He said, "Don't worry, Jack. I'll look after Lucille."

Then it was over. Jack was dead. Lon no longer had a pardner. He stood up unsteadily. He tried to shove the mounting hate down inside him knowing all the while that the hate could not be suppressed. It didn't matter any more that he was ruined. There wouldn't be any Kelley and Carlson Transport, but Halpern wouldn't enjoy any success either because he'd get Halpern. As for Jeanne—he didn't know. He was too mixed up to figure that part out.

Vaguely, he remembered his last words to Jack; that he would look after Lucille. Well, he could keep that promise to his pardner. Lon climbed on his horse and began retracing his way toward Red Dog.

BY THE time Lon reached Red Dog, it had begun to snow gently. The yellow lights, streaming from the buildings, cut diagonal swaths through the sifting flakes. As he tied his horse to the hitching rack the sheriff took his arm, and there were questions and later a brief and heated scene with Randall.

Lon went through the interviews automatically. Neither the sheriff nor Randall seemed to matter much. Afterwards, he tried to find Lucille. She wasn't in Red Dog. She had been seen leaving on the trail to Banner. Lon picked up a fresh horse at the livery stable and headed down the trail again. The snowflakes grew larger and they fell faster.

He passed the men coming in from the scene of the raid with the dark forms lashed across the back of horses. Lon saluted the posse and kept on. The dead were beyond his help, now.

Farther along the trail he caught sight of a mounted figure ahead through a rift in the swirling snow. He shouted and spurred on until he came abreast of the rider.

"You shouldn't be ridin' trail tonight."

Lucille lashed out at him with her quirt and tried to pull on ahead. Lon grabbed her bridle and brought the two horses to a jerking halt.

"Well," she said fiercely, "Mr. Lochinvar, I guess. Let me go!"

"I promised Jack before he died I'd see you was all right."

"I don't need your protection."

Her attitude galled him. He blinked the snowflakes out of his eyes and said softly, "I don't much care what you want. On account of Jack, I'll see you wherever you're going."

He couldn't see her face; only the dark blurred shadow of her form in the falling snow was visible. Her voice carried the sting of an angry wasp as she said, "Let me go. I know what I'm doing and I don't mean for you or anyone to stop me. Do you think, just because Jack's dead, it makes any difference?"

"What makes a difference?"

"Getting out of here."

Lon caught his breath, trying not to believe what her words told him. Then he caught the glimmer of steel in her hand and he reached out just as the gun spat yellow flame at him. The slug whistled by, dangerously close to him. Then he knocked the gun out of her hand.

In a low tone he said, "This ain't fun any more, lady. You say you didn't love Jack—that you only wanted him so he could take you East?"

She didn't answer. He held her wrist tightly with one hand. She began to whimper a little.

"Oh, hell!" Lon said and let her go.

She wasted no time kicking her horse down the trail. Lon watched her disappear. Then he began following. The cold numbed him, but it was not as agonizing as the bitterness that reached out over him. He might have guessed from Lucille's cold green eyes that she had no motives that weren't selfish. Then a remembrance of something she had said came back to Lon. He suspected suddenly that it was more than a woman's intuition at work when she had told him his wagon train wasn't going to be attacked. She had been sure about it. She had known.

His mind whirled. It came as a flash that he might have been wrong, all along, about Jeanne. A new hope was struggling within him.

Abruptly, he began driving his horse harder into the snowfall. If Jeanne were not involved it made a lot of difference. It was worth fighting for things, for his future. He'd have to beat Halpern at his own game, and save that contract with Randall.

In his throbbing eagerness he had pressed on almost to Banner before he realized that he had not overtaken Lucille. It was unlikely, he thought, that she had been able to travel as fast as he. He checked his horse and slipping out of the saddle, examined the trail. There was no indication that a rider had passed along the trail for some time. That was odd. She must have cut off somewhere, and if she had done that, there had to be a reason.

He knew that in the falling snow it would not take long for any tracks to be obliterated. He wheeled his mount around and began slowly retracing his steps, eyes slanting into the driving storm.

A FEW miles back, he found where a horse had turned off down a narrow side trail, but it was hard to follow and Lon had to dismount and pick his way on foot. Sloshing through drifts, he sank up to his knees and progress was slow. But after a little he caught the glimmer of light ahead and then he came upon a cabin half hidden in a clump of large, snow-covered pinyons.

Lon circled around, leaving his horse tied in a thicket. He kept to the shadows, away from the faint light that streamed out from the frosted windows. Behind the cabin were sheds and evidence that animals had been in the area not too many hours before. He did not examine what he found in detail, but he was sure, now, of what he had only suspected before. This was Halpern's hideout to which Lucille had led him. It was she, not Jeanne who had sold him and Jack out to the raider. Jack had trusted her. He had confided in her. His confidence had resulted in the lead which blasted life out of him.

Lon began crawling through the snow toward the cabin. His senses seemed to have been honed to razor sharpness. Each nerve in his body grew taut as the tension built up within him. He no longer felt the flakes of snow falling on his burning face nor the sharpness of the wind.

Under the window he hesitated, feeling his heart thumping against the wall of his chest. Then, slowly, he raised himself from his squatting position until he could look inside between the patches of frost. At first he could not see anyone, but he heard Lucille begin to talk, her voice high-pitched and shrill.

"I gave you the information you wanted. I want my money."

She moved into the range of Lon's vision, followed by Halpern.

"You'll git it," Halpern said.

"I want it now!" Lucille cried. "I went to Red Dog to meet you like we planned, but you tried to outsmart me. I figured you'd be hiding here. We made a deal. I've got to get out of this area—go East . . . I need what you promised."

She began beating Halpern on the chest. Halpern pulled back, reached out a hand and slammed it across Lucille's face. She went over backwards to the floor, her face draining white as she saw Halpern going for his holster.

"Not you or any other woman is tellin' me what to do," Halpern said in a hollow, ominous voice.

Lon ducked away from the window. The snow sucked at his boots as he sprinted for the cabin door. He didn't know why it mattered—why he couldn't let Halpern use his gun. Maybe because of Jack. Jack had loved the woman, and if he loved enough he would forgive her her treachery.

He pulled out his gun and wrenched open the cabin door. Eyes narrowed, he stepped inside, saying, "Reach, Halpern."

The sudden light from the lantern momentarily blinded Lon. He blinked and kept moving in.

Lucille screamed. Lon's vision cleared just as the gun in Halpern's fist exploded, spurting red and filling the cabin with ringing thunder.

Lon felt himself being driven backwards, twisted half around, as he staggered under the slamming impact of driving lead. The cabin wall stopped him from going down. He braced himself, brought his gun up and balanced it carefully as he triggered.

Halpern darted sideways, his handsome face twisting into a snarl. Lon's bullet splintered wood just beyond where he had stood. Then Halpern fired again. The gun in Lon's hand was torn from his fingers and went slithering across the floor. Ice began to form along Lon's spine. This was it. The end.

He watched Halpern's eyes momentarily shuttle across the room to where Lucille still remained in a heap on the floor. A pile of crates, taken probably from the raided wagon train, were stacked in a corner of the cabin. Beside them was a tangle of harness and other equipment: gloves, whips, saddle padding. Lon began edging slowly along the wall.

Halpern stepped forward, leaning over to pick up Lon's gun. At that moment Lon moved, reached out and came snapping erect with a bullwhip he had snatched from the pile. Halpern forgot the gun on the floor and threw another streaking shot at Lon as he straightened.

The cracking smash of the slug against Lon's hipbone set his teeth grinding together. But he fought against going down, knowing that he must finish this before the fog gained control of his brain. He flicked his wrist, remembering the many times he had cleared the flies off the back of mules with the tip of a whip. The long thong curled over his head and then it snaked out with a dry crack like an exploding gun. He heard Halpern scream as rawhide licked around his arm and then the fingers about his gun opened spasmodically and the gun slipped out of his nerveless fingers.

Jerking the whip, Lon pulled Halpern off balance. Then he dived at the man and they fell crashing to the floor. Lon brought his bunched fist in, slashing against Halpern's jaw. The freighter's eyes began to glaze. Lon turned the slack figure over and lashed his hands behind his back with a strip of rawhide from the whip.

Only when he stood up, weak and unsteady from the loss of blood, did he notice that Lucille had disappeared. He stumbled to the door and watched the horse and rider streak past, to disappear into the curtain of snow.

THE storm was over. Bright sunlight, sparkling against the white crust, threw dancing light into the office of Kelley and Carlson Transport. Lon, seated behind his desk, eyes half-closed, watched Jeanne as she worked at a column of figures.

After a while he pushed himself out of the chair and limped over to the stove. It was funny, not having Jack around, he thought as he added a few sticks to the blaze. Things seemed empty.

Turning, he said softly, "Got that new contract with Randall today. But I need a pardner."

"You mean for business?"

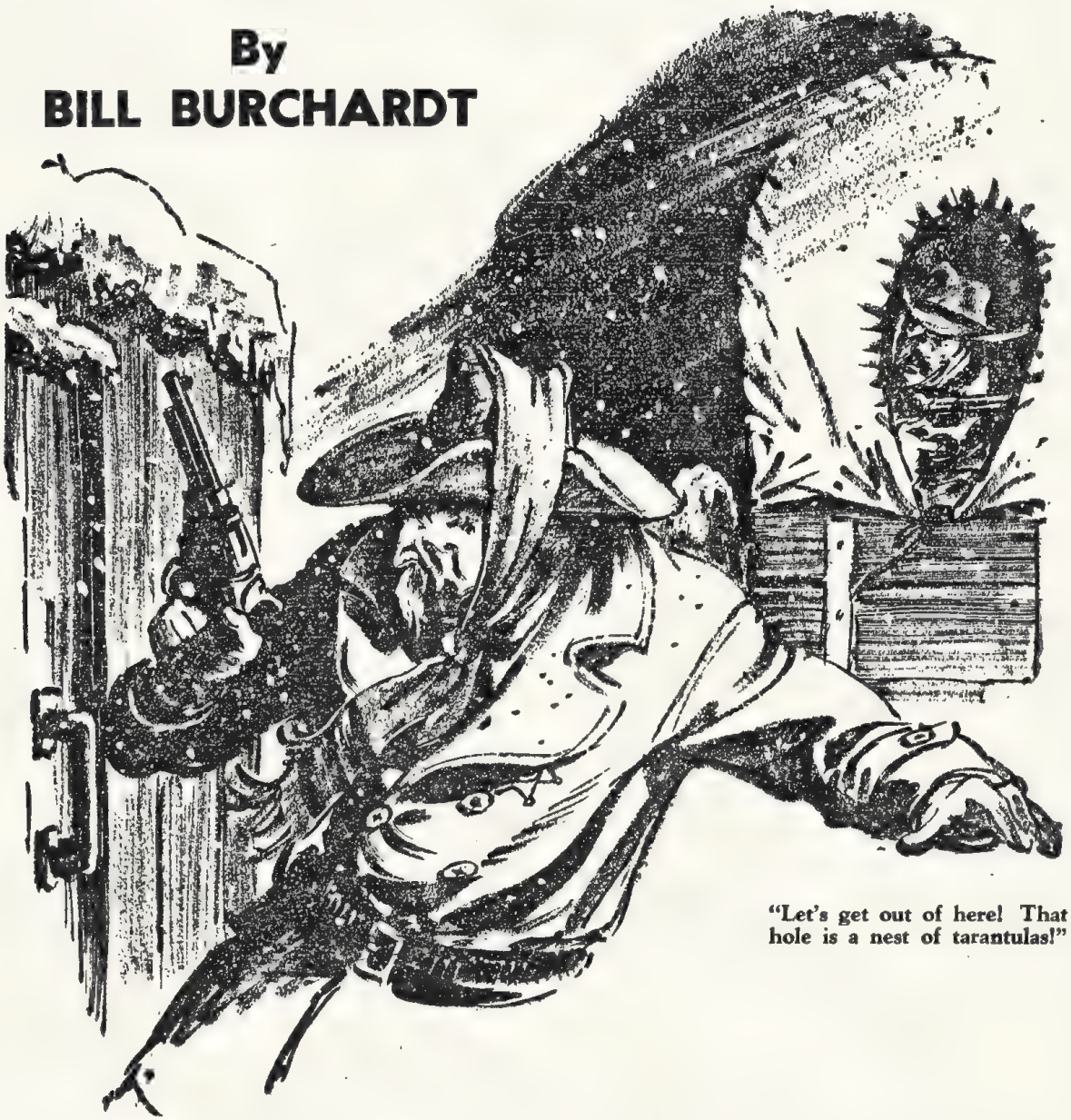
He didn't answer her directly. Instead

(Continued on page 111)

BLIZZARD TRAIL

A Fact Story of the Old West

By
BILL BURCHARDT



"Let's get out of here! That hole is a nest of tarantulas!"

Carefully, Marshal Bill Tilghman edged to the soddy door. . . . If he made one wrong move—a dozen Doolin guns would blast him to hell!

CHARLIE BEARCLAW, Indian ex-army scout, drove the team and wagon into the blizzard; an icy norther laden with sleet and snow, driven by a slashing prairie wind. The bone-chilling blast whipped and snapped the wagon-sheet cover like a loose sail.

Two Deputy United States Marshals, Bill Tilghman and Neal Brown, jounced in

the wagon bed, hunched against the cold. The scant straw in the wagon made a hard seat as the wrenching, twisting rig lurched across the blizzard-white, trackless Oklahoma prairie.

For the word was out that Bill Doolin's gang was holed up on Bee Dunn's ranch, somewhere southeast of Pawnee. The rumor said that Dunn's place had become a headquarters from which the owlhoots were raiding and rustling cattle.

The winter day was melting into dusk. Shielding their faces against the knifing wind and sleet that whipped into the covered wagon. Tilghman and Brown talked. They dreaded fording the bitter cold water of the Cimarron, which lay somewhere ahead, and discussed what they knew about Bill Doolin.

A wily outlaw, Doolin was one of the few members of the Dalton gang who had escaped death in Coffeyville. Doolin had argued with the Daltons on the way in to Coffeyville. That planned bank raid didn't feel "right" to him, and he turned back at the edge of town.

Doolin made a wise decision, for the townspeople were waiting in ambush, and Coffeyville became a nightmare of lead and death for the notorious Daltons. Bill Doolin lived to rally the broken remnants of the gang, and added a few renegades of his own choosing.

Bitter Creek Newcomb, Bill Raidler, Arkansaw Tom, Dick West, Ol Yountis, Red Buck Waightman—all names that meant fear and death to the newly-formed Territory of Oklahoma, to Kansas, Missouri, and Texas. And there were others in the outfit, train and bank robbers, rustlers, murderers; as desperate as the James Brothers and the Youngers.

Tilghman and Brown had no intention of tackling the gang alone. They hoped to reach Pawnee by nightfall, then ride out next day with a posse to locate Dunn's ranch. But it grew later and they had not yet reached the Cimarron. The two marshals began to be concerned. It was far too cold to consider spending the night on this wind-swept prairie.

PERHAPS they had confused their directions in the storm. The iron wheels of the wagon made a lonely and ominous sound as they crunched through the ice-covered grass and slid on the icy sandstone ledges. Both of the lawmen were mightily pleased when they saw smoke rising. It came from the chimney of a rough dugout perhaps a quarter-mile down a draw from the trail they were making.

Charlie Bearclaw whoahed the cold-numbed team up beside the dugout. When no one came out, Bill Tilghman climbed down. His heavy mustache was white and stiff with rime-frost as he spoke.

"Sit tight, boys. I'll go in and find out where we are. We can still go on into Pawnee," he proposed, "if it's not too far."

He walked to the dugout's door and knocked. No answer. He pushed the door open. A blazing fire of post-oak logs roared and snapped in a fireplace at the far end of the dugout. A lone man sat before the fire.

Tilghman walked through the dugout and extended his hands toward the fragrant warmth of the fire. He observed then that a Winchester rifle lay across the man's lap.

Knowing the taciturn habits of these Osage country ranchers, Bill opened the conversation. "This fire feels mighty good!"

Silence. . . .

"Can you tell me how to get to Bee Dunn's ranch?" continued the marshal.

"Find out for yourself!" came the scowling rejoinder.

Curiously, the rancher's voice sounded more scared than belligerent to Bill Tilghman. He said calmly, "All right, I will," and turned his back to the fire.

Both sides of this dugout bunkhouse were lined with comfortable-looking, curtained

bunks. Enough to sleep sixteen or eighteen men, Tilghman thought, and it entered his mind that here would be a warm, pleasant place to spend the night.

And then he saw something which made his flesh crawl.

Hackles of hair raised on the back of his neck. Blue gun barrels and rifle-snouts were barely poking through the curtains of almost every one of those bunks. Marshal Bill Tilghman knew then that he had found Bee Dunn's ranch.

It became suddenly apparent to him that he might sleep here; permanently. But Bill Tilghman had nerves as cold as the steel aimed at him.

He passed a few quiet comments on the weather, a bad storm even for January. His only answer was the hiss of melting sleet that fell on the hearth; blowing in between the cracks of the rough blackjack logs.

At last he made some final comment to his voiceless host, and began the slow walk through that aisle of death. Bill Tilghman knew that if he went for his guns he would go down in an instant hail of lead from every side.

He reached the door; and pulled the latch thong. He stepped through, yanked the door shut behind him and snaked out his guns in a single movement. He could hear the sudden noise of confusion inside and a furiously angry voice shouted;

"Get out of my way so I can kill that dirty son!"

As the words were whipped away by the bitter cold wind, Tilghman recognized that voice. It was the murderous Red Buck Waightman.

But the door did not open. Tilghman made it to the wagon and leaped to the seat, seizing the reins from Charlie Bearclaw.

"Let's get out of here!" Tilghman exclaimed. "That hole is a nest of tarantulas!"

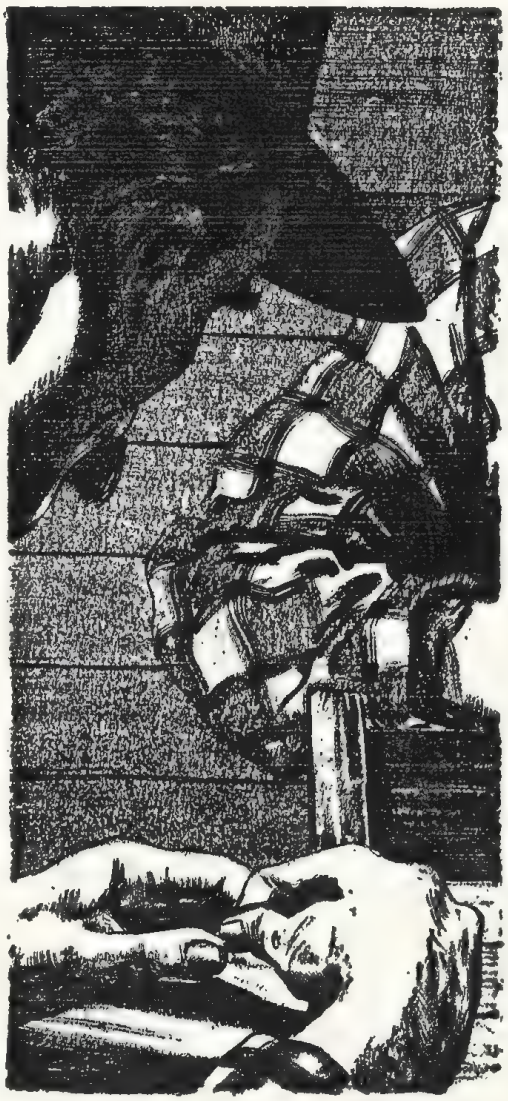
THEY made it to Pawnee that night, and returned to Bee Dunn's ranch the next morning with a hurriedly-recruited posse. Dunn himself appeared, hands aloft, from the brush a short distance from his dugout. The Doolin gang was gone.

Tilghman learned that there had been nine men in that dugout. Bill Doolin has been called "a good cowboy gone wrong" by many who knew him, and he was a courageous man with many fine qualities.

Had it not been for Doolin's firm control of his men, along with rancher Dunn's impassioned arguments, the wilder outlaws in the gang would have murdered Bill Tilghman in cold blood. Red Buck Waightman had pleaded that they let him do so, and cursed Doolin and Dunn as cowards for restraining him.

Rancher Dunn was able to prove that he had been an unwilling prisoner of the gang, unable to warn Tilghman. Dunn was himself later commissioned a Deputy United States Marshal, pledged to aid in wiping out the gang. • • •

They met at last, the tinhorn and his enemy, on a crust of cracking snow. And the first shot fired would send them both to their deaths!



JACK DUNELLEN had planned to leave Lost Creek Camp on the heels of breakup anyway. He did not need to be prodded. Who would, with nearly five hundred ounces of gold in his cache, and Laura waiting for him down in Billroth?

So he had heeded Old Pete's warnings, and now watched anxiously for his chance to go. Breakup was close. The other day's warm wind from the east had been a forerunner of freshet time. The wind, and a bright sun, had melted the surface of the snow. That night a bitter wind had swept down over the high country from the north, and chilled the melted snow surface to an icy crust. It was hard and strong

Stirring Saga
of the Frozen Mining Country

THE LOST CREEK TINHORN

By ROBERT TRIMNELL

There was s i l e n c e. Then the kid said, "Let me see t h e m cards!"

enough to support a man on snowshoes on any of the south slopes, and in places you'd need an axe to smash through. But it wasn't safe for walking out of the winterbound camp. Beneath a solid-looking crust there might be a deep ravine with powder snow thirty, forty feet deep. Or the snow might have slid away and left only crust, so a man could fall into a rocky black world beneath.

Yet, useless as it was, the crust gave warning that spring breakup was coming, and soon Jack might slip away through the melting snow.

Jack was shoveling gravel into the sluice that day, when old Pete Hagers came tramping down from the cabin. He peered into the sluice, and snorted. The ridges of the box held yellow glints, but without the brightness of sun on snow they wouldn't look like much at all. "Poor, hound-dog poor," the old man said.

"Some days you can't even draw a pair," Jack replied, slipping in another shovelful, and watching the flow of water from his dam ripple the gravel away.

"That ain't what I mean," Pete said, whispering. He looked up at Jack, eyes flicking and one hinting at a wink, to give a conspiritorial air. "Boy, I mean chances of mushin' out, immediate, are poor."

"Sure. It would be a fool's trick. Why?" Jack looked quizically at the oldster, glanced downstream at the bent backs of a half dozen other prospectors, laboring over sluice boxes of their own, wondering why Pete meant for those others not to hear.

"But it might be safest," Pete said. "Sometimes a fella's got to gamble, and stayin' another month might not be the best 'un. If a fella mushed to the ol' Farnworth cabin, now we got this crust, from there he might have to set only two weeks, because that's on the south slope, and it'll break up sooner."

"You mean me?"

"It's you that got most of the gold in camp, ain't it?"

JACK straightened, big-boned hands wrapped around the shovel. His shoulders hunched as he leaned on the shoulder, and stared down at the oldster. Pete had a big red nose and gray eyebrows that twirled at the corners. The eyebrows crimped now, secretively. Jack couldn't quite figure it; Pete did not ruffle or scare easy. He'd survived thirty high-country winters. Even when a blizzard came, Pete only said, " 'Shaw! Snow. Means cards for a spell."

Pete said, "I taught you everythin' you know about the high country, boy. Listen to me. I can smell the fever. Breakup fever. It's a game ever'body can play and does, and usually they hop on jist one, like a pack of hounddogs when one is beat in a fight, and they climb on."

"Sure. Everybody's edgy. But why get scared all of a sudden?"

"Bunce Kole is talkin' that you are the luckiest card player he ever saw. He says, funny how Jack Dunnellen just *allus* wins, that lucky hound. You wouldn't reckon a man could win so often. It jist don't seem likely."

"They forget that my dad was a gambler on the river boats, and I learned cards when they were on rocking horses."

"No-o. They don't forget it. Fact, Bunce Kole is remarkin' on it today. Him and Kid Connover been drinkin' one of Bunce's last bottles o' Longhorn today, and they've talked considerable about it. I don't reckon you should of mentioned your dad dealt cards for a livin'."

The oldster yawned suddenly, and flicked his eyes toward his shoulder, to indicate that someone was coming. He whispered, "Think it over, boy," and went off stiff-jointed toward his own claim.

It was Severs, a tall skinny man, carrying a shovel. "Luck?" he rasped.

"Not my day," Jack answered.

"Cards'll make up for it," the man grunted, and strode on.

It was near dark when Jack returned to his cabin. The sun was still red on the snow off to the south, but here a high peak had cut it off, and Lost Creek Strike was in the gathering purple of night. The air was cold, windless, beginning to bite through heavy clothing.

The cabin was reached by a tunnel through stacks of cut firewood. Snowshoes hung by the door. He'd had little use of them. The paths to the stream were pounded hard, and his supply of wood had been dragged up close to the cabin for snowtime cutting. There was little game to chase. But at worst, the making of the snowshoes had filled stormbound days.

He went inside and put a match to the already-laid fire. It was a big, snug cabin, with ears of corn hanging from the rafters, bags of beans beside them, and a single, dwindling red string of dried chili peppers. It was the best cabin in camp, the warmest and best supplied. Jack had come to the high country with a fellow named Swede Anderson. Swede didn't take to prospecting. On a fertile slope he planted corns and beans, and then went to work building a cabin. When the fall cold came, he got a hankering for town. He sold the cabin, and his corn and bean crops to Jack for three hundred dollars, and left as the snow began to fly.

Jack could afford it. There might be only ten dollars in dust in his sluice at the end of the day, but there would be fifty, a hundred, on the poker table at night. His ten would be on the table, and ten or so would go home with it. Gradually, Lost Creek's gold gravitated to him. He had five thousand dollars cached in the cabin.

And down in Billroth was Sam Jenkin's one-horse copper mine, and Sam's daughter, Laura. Jack meant to buy into the mine, and marry Laura—after breakup.

KID CONNOVER came in shortly. Only a couple years younger than Jack, but thin and fuzz-bearded, with a jerky, sometimes shrill voice. "You dealin' here tonight?" he said.

Jack said, "You talk like I'm runnin' a gambling house."

"Well. . . ." He said that, and left a conclusion to be drawn.

Jack shot him a flat stare. The Kid was broke. Beyond doubt he was the worst poker player Jack had ever seen. The Kid would stay in stud with a four showing and a three in the hole. Jack's father had taught him, at the age of ten, the first rule of stud: stay in only if you've got an ace or a pair in the first two cards. Otherwise, drop out!

Jack said, "Connover, you ever see Bunce Kole shoot a bird on the wing with a rifle? Sure you have. Can you do it? No. Can I? You wouldn't match shots with Bunce, would you?"

"No," the Kid admitted.

"Then don't match cards with me, and you'll be a lot richer."

"I won sixty dollars, once."

"Sure, once," Jack sighed. "Connover, you want some corn bread and gravy with me?"

The Kid mumbled, "All right," and slumped down onto a stool.

Jack had made a mush of ground corn meal yesterday. When the tin stove that Swede had built was hot, he bacon-greased the pan and put it on. He climbed a stool to nip one of the peppers off the string. He cut that into the pan and dumped in the corn meal batter. As it sizzled away, he put the pot of bean gravy on to heat. His cookery was a mixture of old Pete's frypan grub, Swede's Scandinavian love for fish—there was a part of a smoked herring in the bean gravy—and the chili habits of Sam Jenkin's Mexican cook.

If he hadn't been at Lost Creek Strike, the dinner would have been an unendurable mess. But everybody sampled it from time to time, and agreed that Jack Dunellen's grub was at least distinctive.

At the last moment Jack remembered the

leg of the snowshoe rabbit that Pete had shot the other day. It had been tough as saddle leather, so he'd boiled the critter and then split it up. Jack threw the leg into the bean gravy and let it simmer a while longer.

The cabin began to heat up, so they peeled off their jackets. They made smokes and sat, not talking. There wasn't much talk between them. Jack had grown up fast and easily; a gambler's son met all the world at an early age, and either sank or swam. The Kid was still fighting hard to grow up. Besides, he had something on his mind tonight, and there was an edginess to him, a waspish anger.

They ate, the Kid screwing up his face at the taste of the food, but hungry from a day at the sluice. Then Jack put the coffee on the stove—a mixture of roasted corn salted with a few of his remaining coffee beans, plus old grounds. This late in the season, everything was odds-and-ends.

"I got about ten dollars worth today," the Kid said. "Want to deal a couple hands?"

"Let's see it," Jack said. The Kid took a leather sack from his pocket and showed a few yellow grains and a half-moon nugget that looked like a finger-nail paring.

"I'll call it ten dollars," Jack said, though he knew it wasn't. No matter. The Kid would eventually lose it all anyway. Jack got out a box of the washers which were used as chips when poker was played in his cabin. He gave the Kid ten small washers for dimes, and nine big ones for dollars, and put the gold in a similiar leather bag in his own shirt pocket.

"No damn cheating," the Kid said. He flicked thin fingers. "Deal 'em!"

Jack smiled inwardly. "Draw?" he said. The Kid nodded. He dealt the cards, saw the Kid's eyes tighten and his gaze fix on Jack's hands. Jack thought, they always think you're bottom-carding them, but that's foolish when you only need card-savvy to win. Instead of thinking of odds, they watch the gambler's fingers. He shrugged.

The door slammed open and a couple of red-faced prospectors came in. They called "Howdy!" and then went to the stove and stood before it rubbing their hands.

Jack eyed them carefully. Their "howdy" had been cheerful enough, but they hadn't added anything to it, and now no one met his eye. Their mood was sullen, wary. Soon, the door opened again and more entered. Jack saw the Kid glance quickly at the newcomers, then ignore them. Bunce Kole was among them. It was Kole whom old Pete had warned him about. Kole and the Kid talking this afternoon over a bottle of whiskey, talking the way men will after a winter enclosed by the snow. Angry over trifles, sullen to old friends.

It was that way with the others, when they filed in. There were seventeen men in camp, and almost all had come. Six held cards at the table, and seven sat round about on stools, benches, and chunks of firewood.

BUNCE KOLE was in the game, directly facing Jack. A wide-faced man with a curly black beard and beady blue eyes. He sat hunched over his cards, fisting them tight, his nostrils flaring as though with suppressed anger. He had not been in long when he was bucking Jack in a big pot. Jack was playing indifferently; he did not want to win tonight, and he passed up many likely hands. But he was in this hand and Kole was pushing hard, looking big, so he stayed in. Maybe Kole wouldn't be so proddy if he took a good one, he thought. On the other hand, his own cards were good enough. On the draw he'd filled out a flush.

Old Pete came in, snorting at the tobacco-filled air. He said, "Raise him, son. He's bluffing."

"Reckon so," Jack said, and threw five big washers onto the table.

Kole growled, "You all of a sudden

raisin'? Thought you just tagged along in this hand."

Old Pete said, "Put up or shut up, Kole."

Kole slammed his hand down on the table, face down. "Hell, you two together on this? One prods, the other raises! Besides, Dunellen, you dealt this hand."

Stung now, Jack said, "I dealt it. You paid to see it. Buy in, or get out with your head closed!"

Kole swore, slid five washers into the pot, and threw his hand onto the table. There were three aces, a deuce and a trey. He glared at Jack, forearms braced on the table.

"Mine are all red," Jack said, scooping the pot in and flinging his hand out for the other to see.

There was a heavy silence. Old Pete broke it by stepping up on a stool to reach the ears of corn hanging from the rafters. He peeled off a husk, without taking down any of the ears. He crumbled a husk to eke out his tobacco. The crackling sound of the dry husks broke the silence. Then the Kid said, "Let me see them cards!"

He swept Kole's hand across the table, turned it. He brought a card close to the lamp and squinted at it. The others crowded around. He yelled, fiercely, "This ace is marked, you can see it right up at the corner—one of them fine lines, looks like part of the zig-zag lines on the back!" He turned the other two aces and laid them beside it, and pointed out similar, almost invisible markings.

Kole was rising. He spat, "Dunellen, you dirty son! No wonder you stayed—you had my three aces marked!" He slashed a broad-bladed knife from his belt, and went across the table like a bulky panther, hands and knees churning him over to hurtle at Jack.

Jack leaped back, kicking his chair out of the way. His hand went to his coat pocket, to the gun he carried there. Then the Kid hit him on the side of the head, and he went down.

Kole kicked him in the back as he rolled, trying to jump his ribs. Old Pete moved in then, ramming a work-hardened fist into the side of Kole's face. Kole yelled, "Damn card-swindlin' tinhorn! And you, you old coot, you're in it with 'im!"

Jack lost count of the times he was hit. The whole mob was upon him and Pete, it seemed, though some were just caught in the crush, and one man cried, "Hold now, hold! Talk it out—" But nobody heard him. The handle of Kole's knife crashed Jack under the ear. He stumbled. The Kid kicked his ankles, knocking him down. Then a stool smashed into his head, and he collapsed heavily to the floor.

CHAPTER 2 Pursuit!

It was biting cold when he came to. Someone was rubbing his hands and trying to get him to stand up.

Jack rose, clutching his whirling head. He saw Old Pete's big nose was swollen on one side, and a blue bruise slowly closing down over his right eye. He looked about; the cabin whirled. It wasn't his cabin. It was small, and stunk heavily of whiskey.

"Kole's cabin," Pete grunted. "They throwed us in and locked us tight. We best start a fire, 'less you want to warm on Kole's whiskey instead."

"Let's make a fire." Jack felt the numbness in his feet now. He glanced down and saw his boots and socks were gone. Pete was in similiar shape. His red longhandles were down as far as possible over his ankles, making his white feet look somehow dead and ghostly.

They built a fire in the rough clay and stone fireplace in the corner. They sat and put their freezing feet up to it. "Door locked?" Jack asked.

"Timber jammed agin it outside. But what's that matter? We ain't goin' to go out barefoot in the snow."

Jack nodded. They dragged a log up

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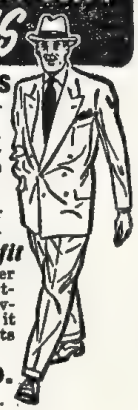

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before the fire and sat on it, with their feet to the fire. Jack said ,"I guess they're tearing my cabin apart, looking for my cache."

"Can they find it?"

"No."

Pete let that rest. He said, "I know that you never marked them cards."

"Thanks. I didn't. I think it was the Kid or Kole. Which means they slipped them into one of my decks—or stole one of my decks, marked it, replaced it." He sat bolt upright, startled. "Listen—if they have been sneaking around my cabin—they know where the cache is!"

Pete shot him a look, not wanting to ask, but showing his curiosity.

"It's in those corn ears hanging from the rafters. I hollowed out a bunch of the cobs with a hot iron. With the husks tied up around the butt end, you can't see the opening. There's ten of 'em now, with about five hundred dollars in dust and nuggets plugged into each."

"If Kole knows that, I reckon he'll steal him some cookin' corn, while the whole gang is at tearin' the cabin apart. Son, a gambler's got a hard life. 'Minds me of the fella stole a five-dollar gun. Accidental he shot a hole in his own foot with it, and had to pay the doc fifty dollars to patch up the hole. You spent all winter cozenin' them fellas out of their gold, now it's stole and likely they'll get mad enough to hang you."

They heard voices outside. There was a heavy crash, as though a log were heaved away from the door. The door flung open, and they came streaming in. A dozen big, angry men. The Kid was in the lead, his face pale with anger.

"Where'd you hide it? We've tore that cabin to pieces!"

Another growled, "You been settin' easy all winter, chiatin' us of our gold—"

"I never cheated anybody!" Jack yelled, leaping to his feet.

(Continued on page 102)

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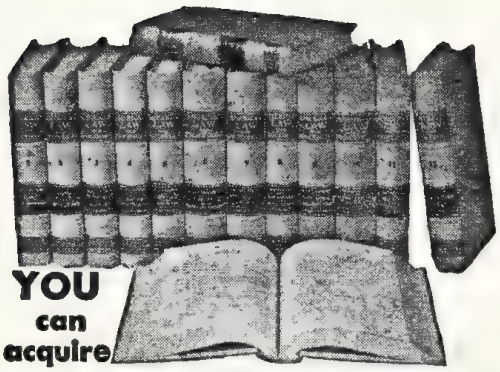

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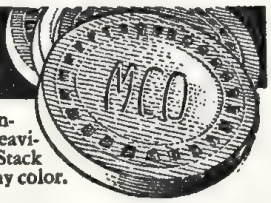

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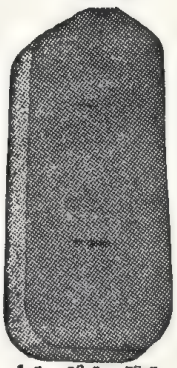

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(Continued from page 100)

They stood in a semi-circle, snorting, not believing. Steam rose from their clothes.

Old Pete said, "Now don't you boys get riled, like the fella with the rabbit hound that wouldn't hunt rabbits, so he turned it loose on panther trail, because he'd spent a lot o' money on that dog, and then the panther killed the dumb hound."

"Shut up, you old fool," the Kid squealed. "Give 'em some rope, see if they don't talk up!"

Severs began stalking toward them, uncoiling a long rope.

Pete cried, "I tell you where! Thet gold is in them ears of corn hangin' in the rafters! It's in holes inside some of the ears."

Half of them stormed out. The rest remained, looked to Jack for confirmation, the Kid among them. Jack glared at them, and said nothing.

Suddenly, the Kid cried, "Kole! Kole took down a dozen ears for cookin'!"

They all bolted then. Jack and old Pete ran out after them, through the icy snow so fast that they'd reached Jack's cabin before the snow seemed really cold to their bare feet. The cabin was wrecked; they found their boots in the pile of broken boards that had been the table. The others went feverishly at tearing down the corn ears. But none had the extra few pounds weight that gold would give it. The gold was gone.

Somebody looked hurriedly around the camp, and came in to report that Kole was gone, too.

THE moon was up, and snowfields stretched off in great white waves. Over in the shadow of some spruce, where the snow had been sheltered from the sun, the crust was thin, and the men found a place where it had been broken. The marks of snowshoes were clearly visible.

"Off to the old Farnworth cabin," Pete grunted. "Long trek. Thirty mile, reckon, and if that crust don't last all the way, he's got twelve, fifteen feet of powder snow to burrow through, some places. Come breakup, we're like to find his body on the way to Farnworth's."

"Happens to be five thousand dollars he stole," Jack said. "Damned if I'll wait until breakup!"

"What you mean?" Kid Connover yelled. "*Your* money! We dug that gold out of the crick. You just slick-carded it away from us!"

Jack didn't answer that. It should be clear enough to them that Kole had marked the cards and planted them to throw suspicion on Jack. If they were at all reasonable, they'd see it. But now they weren't reasonable. They'd been snowbound too long, short on grub too long, too weary of each other's company.

Old Pete said, "'Pears to me, that gold belongs to the fella or fellas that take it away from Kole."

They looked out at the snow crust, and thought of Kole's expert rifle shooting, and glanced at the sky, which was clear but seemed to promise nothing good. They reckoned the odds, and didn't like it.

Jack too had figured the odds, and considered them worse than if a man with a deuce and trey bucked a fellow with an ace showing. But that was his gold; it was going to buy a share in Sam Jenkins's mine, and set him up with Laura. He said, "Nobody wants it?"

A couple of very heavy men pleaded that the snow wouldn't support their weight. Pete said he was too old and worn out. A couple others grabbed that for an excuse. The Kid spoke of Kole's expert rifle shooting, and that shut the rest up. They fidgeted and nobody stepped forward.

Shortly Jack was on snowshoes, with a warm jacket and a rifle, and slogging off over the crust.

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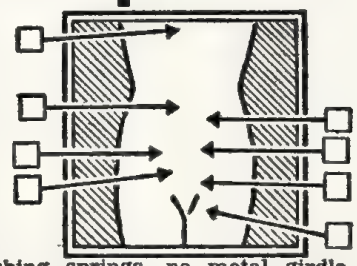

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HE DIDN'T need to track Kole. Kole would stick to the south slopes, where the sun had crusted the snow the hardest, and there was only one pass to the old Farnworth cabin. Jack slung the rifle over his shoulder to leave his arms free for pumping, and he slogged rapidly. He calculated that Kole was twenty pounds heavier than he, and was carrying fifty pounds or more of gold and supplies. His lead was less than a half hour from the start. With his added weight, he'd have to circle some thin spots that Jack could cross directly.

Slogging along, he could feel the snow begin to give under him, the crust weaving with his weight. Once he went right through, but the snow was only a couple of feet deep. He scrambled out easily, but he was more cautious, avoiding the shaded spots and north slopes, the places that were too smooth-looking, since they marked full-drifted gullies that might be thirty feet deep.

After a while he found Kole's track. It was in a place where loose snow had blown over from the north side, and powdered the crust. There was no breeze at all to spread the snow further, so he couldn't tell how long since Kole had made these tracks. There was only dead silence, the white glare of the moon, the black thrust of spruces.

As he slogged he thought of how his card sharpness had gotten him out on a snowy desert that might collapse at any moment and fling him into twenty feet of smothering snow. Kole's thievery had gotten him out here, and perhaps that was just. The two of them out on this snow crust.

Suddenly he came upon Kole. He saw the black bulk of the man's figure across a long, empty snowfield, slanting gently to the south. There was some powdered snow on the crust, and Kole's snowshoes flicked up white whorls. He saw the man twist and

look back, then return to slogging heavily along.

Jack redoubled his speed. Bending low, he churned on straight across the slope, closing until only a couple of hundred yards of smooth, glaring white snow separated them. Suddenly, Kole stopped.

Jack expected him to turn and fire. But he did not. He stood stock-still, as though not daring to move a muscle. Jack raised his rifle. Kole stayed where he was. Jack continued to advance. The man still stood with his back to Jack as he slogged along to within a hundred yards. He could see the heavy pack on Kole's back now, and the golden gleam of the ears of corn, tied outside the pack. The man held his rifle in his hand, the butt pointed back past his hip at Jack.

Puzzled, Jack continued. At fifty yards he shouted. The man said something, but standing as he was, faced away, Jack couldn't hear. An instant later, Jack understood.

The crust beneath him sagged about six inches.

He stood there, frozen to stillness, like Kole. He looked slowly around. The snow was too level here, like a slightly tilted lake all the way to where Kole was. It slanted off to the left for some distance, disappearing into the skyline. It was a ravine, drifted full of snow! But lately, Jack guessed, snow had fallen away beneath the crust, so there was nothing to support it but the frail, crisp layer that the sun had melted hard.

He looked down at his feet and saw the faint depression, all around him, that the sagging crust had made. He was sweating hard now. He knew he should get rid of the rifle, to lighten him, and then perhaps he could backtrack. But he was afraid of throwing the rifle; a sudden move might snap the crust.

And there was Kole in another such depression, afraid even to turn his head.

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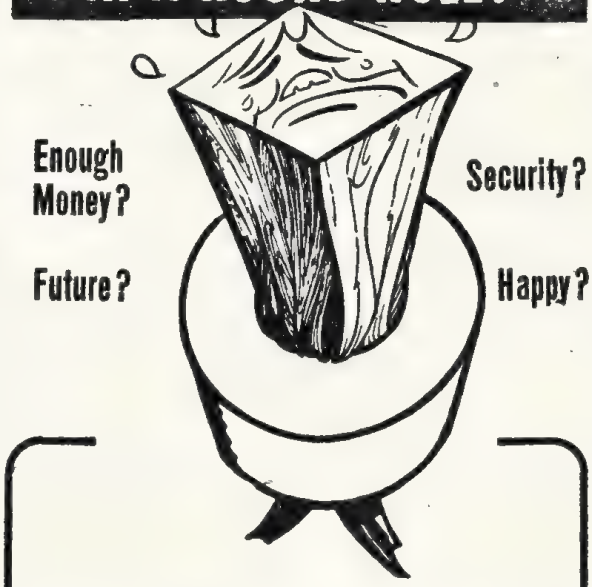

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CHAPTER 3

Crack of Doom

Jack's knees bent slowly. He tried not to shift his weight in any direction, just lower himself as he was standing. He bent down until he held the rifle just off the surface of the crust. His knees trembled. He let the muzzle of the rifle onto the snow. He let the butt down. He thought, *Is my weight weakening it all this time?* He did not know. He pushed the rifle butt a foot away. He dared not nudge it further, because it was dangerous to shift his weight, so he let it lay.

Straightening again, he felt the sweat bug on his forehead. He saw now that Kole had decided on the same plan. The man had opened his knapsack, and, reaching over his shoulder, started pulling things out. First a flitch of bacon. He laid it on the crust and pushed it away with his rifle muzzle. Then a bean sack. Slowly, painfully, he shoved those things away.

Jack took the revolver from his pocket, and now risked the movement of tossing it. It landed with a crunch some ten feet away. The thud crackled the crust beneath his feet and sweat broke out anew. He relieved his pockets of money, jackknife, gold watch, and threw them away. Then his gloves, cap, and finally his jacket. He was sweating so that he was impervious to cold. Still he could feel the crust unsteady under him. He decided to lie down and roll back to harder crust, spreadeagled, and with his hands on the rifle to further distribute the weight.

He glanced again at Kole. The crust must be stronger there, or better supported by snow underneath. Kole's weight was much greater than Jack's. Kole removed the ears of corn from the pack now. The corn husks were tied together. Kole worked with them, and then Jack saw a length of twine or rawhide uncoil as the man laid them down. He tied the string to his ankle.

Then he laid down his rifle, and went flat on his belly behind it.

Kole wriggled away from the weight of the contents of his pack. The string stretched taut and the ears of corn began to follow him, plowing a furrow in the powder snow on the crust. Kole stretched out with the rifle in his hands and inched slowly off.

By then, Jack was down on his belly. The crust crackled beneath him. He must get away from the rifle. He crawled toward the discarded sixgun, knowing he needed some weapon, and though it was a heavy Colt, he must have it. He reached it with the crust still shivering, quaking with the beat of his heart.

He knew one thing. If he fired the gun, the sudden shock of the recoil would break the crust.

KOLE was well away from his scattered supplies, now. The gold-filled ears of corn dragged some eight feet behind his boots. His teeth glinted suddenly. He went on a few feet and then switched around to face Jack. He eased the rifle to his shoulder.

Jack cried, "Kole! Your recoil will break the crust! This whole sheet of ice will go down into the ravine!"

"I got a good strong crust here, Dunellen. I figured those marked cards would take care of you, but looks like it wasn't enough. Well, you'll make a good dinner for the timber wolves." He levered the rifle slowly and carefully, cocked it, and began to sight. "Not many gambles left in you, eh, gambler? The chances kind of run out for you."

Jack lay there with the Colt in his fist, his hand wet with sweat and the gun icy against it. The chances had run out, but for one. And that was not to fire at Kole. The jar would surely break the crust. He lay out flat on his back, spreadeagled. If he could toss the Colt with a slow rolling motion—it wasn't forty feet to where Kole

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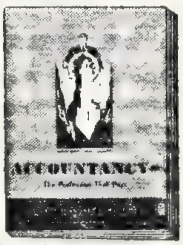

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lay sighting the gun—the fall of a heavy Colt might break through. . . .

He took the barrel in his hand, breathed a prayer, and rolled, flailing his arm and releasing the gun up into the sky.

Beneath him was a warning crunch, but he completed the roll and found himself on a firmer crust. He glimpsed the gun spinning up overhead.

He could not raise enough to see what happened to it. But he saw Kole turn from his rifle and look back of him, toward the gold-filled ears of corn. Beyond the corn Jack could pick out a thin strip of darkness in the crust. It was growing, toward the ears of corn. It was a hole where the Colt had punched through!

Slowly, the weight of the gold was bending the edge of the crust. A split showed reaching slowly around the gold-filled corn toward Kole.

Jack cried, "Get rid of the gold, untie it—it'll drag you down!"

But Kole was no gambler. He was a greedy man with five thousand dollars almost in his hands. He pulled a leg to drag the corn ears closer.

Jack began to roll. Away, back toward the safe snow. He tucked his arms tight and rolled as hard as he could, trying not to bump.

Jack heard a scream.

The whole crust seemed to buckle now, and he rolled frantically. He struck something hard, clawed onto it. A snow-covered rock protruding up through the crust. The scream was louder.

He glimpsed Kole leaping to his feet, as though to run from the gold tied to his ankle. Then the crust gave way.

The air became a mushroom cloud of flying snow. Through it Jack could only glimpse Kole's arms and legs flailing as he dropped through.

Jack was left clinging to that bit of rock as snow dust powdered him, and a yawning ravine showed, empty but for torn

trees jabbing through crumbled snow. When the cloud of snow was gone, he could see the vast reach of snow and rock, and hundreds of yards down the ravine, the avalanche still roaring on.

Somewhere in that fury of white was Kole and the gold.

JACK was not sure he'd make it back to camp. With the tension gone, the cold came biting at his skin, and he realized he was without jacket, boots, snowshoes.

But up on a rise a hundred yards away stood Kid Connover.

The Kid's mouth still hung open with shock and surprise. Then he came gingerly down the slope, scuffing cautiously on his snowshoes.

He helped Jack to safer snow. Jack said, "I bet you a hundred dollars you can't get me back to camp, Connover."

The Kid grinned. "I'll take the bet. Listen, I couldn't—sit there. I played into Kole's game when he said the cards were marked—"

"That's okay, Kid. Forget it. Let's get back to camp before I freeze."

"But Kole—he made a fool out of me. I—well, that's done, I guess. I came after you because I figured I ought to help you, it was part my fault. Old Pete talked to me. . . . But I got here too late."

"Not too late to save me from freezin' to death." Jack grinned sadly. "I guess neither Kole or me gets the gold, eh?"

"No! That corn'll grow this spring! Your gold will be marked by big green cornstalks down in that valley. I'll—help you hunt for it."

Jack slapped him on the shoulder, glad to see the Kid grin again. Together they mushed back, thinking of tall green stalks of corn with their roots meshed into gold dust and nuggets, a daydream of green spring and warm lands.

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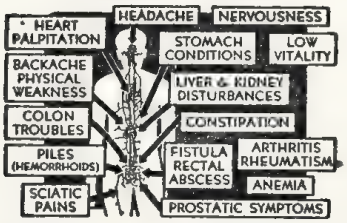

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(Continued from page 41)

A thin-haired, florid-faced man in a bartender's apron pushed through the crowd toward Gallagher. He studied Gallagher's face and then his lips spread in a smile.

"Ain't you the same hombre that high-tailed it out of Dave's Junction about a year ago—a couple weeks after you had a fist fight with a gamblin' man named Red Sheely?"

Gallagher looked the man over carefully. The face seemed to be familiar, but he couldn't place him. "Yes," he said. "Why?"

The florid-faced man's grin widened. "Because you did your runnin' all for nothin'. I had just hired on as an apron in Sheely's place that night you had the fight with him. I saw it and I'll never forget it. Anyway, about two weeks after you left town, old Doc Craven shot Sheely in the back with his derringer. Seems he owed Sheely a pack of money for gamblin' debts, and he figured to cancel 'em.

"They caught the Doc cold. But before they tried him and strung him up he did a lot of talkin'. Seems like Red Sheely had a gosh-awful hankerin' for that sloe-eyed gal that was singin' in his place and he talked Doc into tellin' you that you had a bad heart. He promised to cancel the dinero Doc owed him for faro. Sheely figured you had too much pride to admit you had a sick heart, and that the first time you showed yellow you'd have to move on. Give him a free hand with the gal." He chuckled. "Only it didn't help him none. She run off with a whiskey drummer."

Gallagher glanced toward the doctor. "You check my heart?"

"Certainly. It's sound as a silver dollar."

Nancy Sheldon said, "You're going to stay at our house until you're well. I—we hope you'll stay even after. . . ."

Gallagher looked up into the blue eyes. "I'm aimin' to stay around a long time," he said, and he smiled at the blush his words brought to her cheeks. • • •

WHEN WILD BILL FOUGHT CUSTER!

(Continued from page 63)

tion and agreed that perhaps he had pressing business elsewhere. A friend, who was the engineer on a freight train bound for Kansas City, pointed out to the marshal that time was of the essence and pleaded with him to board the departing train.

As Bill swung up into the cab, legend has it, a body of men could be seen in the distance, coming from the direction of the Fort.

Fortunately for the town, the Seventh moved out of the neighborhood before long, and some of the disturbing element was removed. This did not mean that the prairie city now progressed toward anything like respectability. With the Seventh and Wild Bill gone it was perhaps somewhat less exciting, but there were others who drifted in to fill their places and the population of Boothill came nearer and nearer to equaling that of the boisterous, brawling set of log huts that called itself Hays City. • • •

WHIP RECKONING

(Continued from page 90)

he said, "One of the boys said he ran into Lucille in some small town up in Montana. Funny, she wanted to go back East."

He waited, but Jeanne said nothing.

"The sheriff says Halpern is sure to swing for what happened to Jack. He thought I'd like to hear that. But it seems unimportant, somehow."

Jeanne still didn't say anything, but he had to go on.

"You can't be thinkin' always about the past. You have to live for today and tomorrow."

"You were talking about needing a pardner," Jeanne said then.

"Oh, so I was. Can you skin mules?"

Jeanne shook her head. "But I can cook," she remarked.

"Now if that ain't luck," Lon said smiling. "What I was really after was a pardner who could cook." • • •

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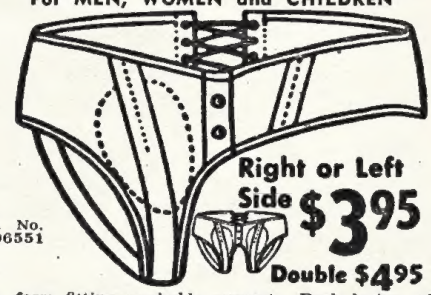

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(Continued from page 8)

arena. Getting to the New World, they went wild and, as centuries slipped away, only the tough and hardy cattle remained alive.

As to color they were almost all black—some jet black, others a sorrel-colored black. Some had linebacks, marked much the same by a sorrel-colored stripe down the spine as are some buckskin horses today on the range. All had black, short horns—the horns of a bull bred and trained for the bull-ring. The horns were razor-tipped, and the owner knew how to use them against wolves and cougars. And, as in the case of the Mormon Battalion, they could also be used sucessfully against humans.

Sometimes they are referred to in history as *mustang* cattle. There is on record the statement of an old Indian fighter that he feared the *cimarrones* worse than he did the Comanches. There is also another record of the *cimarrones* staging a "revolution" against Old Glory. This episode also occurred during the War with Mexico.

It was the year of 1846, and one of the soldiers, seeing a black bull in the brush, evidently decided to have some fun—he probably did not know of the fierce fighting-ability of the *cimarrones,* which, in Spanish, means *the wild ones.* Accordingly, records show that the soldier shot at the bull.

Then, the fireworks started.

The soldier, who evidently had not earned a markmanship medal, missed the bull, and the bull, deciding not to miss the soldier, charged with his tail up and his head down, snorting fire as he roared down on the man. The soldier fled into the ranks, with the bull after him.

"Shoot him!" a private hollered.

"Don't shoot," a corporal insisted. "You'll kill one of our men instead of the bull. Hit him with your rifle butts!"

The butts of rifles made no impression on his sleek black hide. While he chased

some soldiers, others booted him in the ribs and in the flanks. One officer later wrote in his report that the bull evidently had a good time. Finally, winded and weary, the bull swung out of the entanglement, head down and tail up. Bawling defiance, he loped untouched into the brush.

"Fall in," the sergeant said, swearing. "Anybody hurt?"

A few soldiers had scratches, some were shaken up, others were laughing. All agreed that the bull had done more damage than the Mexican army.

Early settlers called the *cimarrones* the *black cattle*. They used to hunt them for game but the hunter always made sure he had a handy tree nearby or else he was on a fast saddle-horse that could outrun a wounded *black cow*.

For two centuries, the *cimarrones* were the rulers of the brush country. But they fell, finally, before a gentler breed, the cow of today. Two factors helped bring their downfall about. First, they ran with the tame cattle and bred themselves out of existence; and second, a rifle bullet didn't care whether it killed a *cimarronè* or a deer or antelope. Today, he is a thing of history.

But he is in the records of the U. S. Army.

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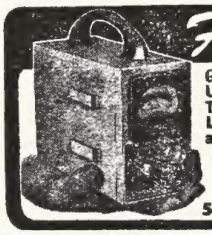

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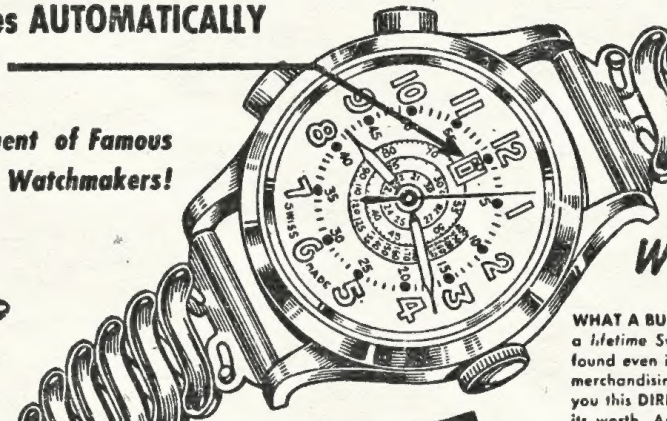

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